

# PERSONAL LEARNING IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

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## ABSTRACT

The establishment of online discussion forums and their application to higher education have encouraged the use of online discussion within tertiary teaching. Recent studies related to online discussions have provided different ways of understanding the effect of online discussions on teaching and learning. This study investigates how personal learning is facilitated through various ways of engagement in an online discussion environment.

The rationale behind this effort has been the concern that online discussions may be being used only because of the availability and technological opportunities the method provides. Personal learning is generally viewed in the literature as an individual's cognitive and knowledge construction and endeavour to make meaning through involvement and interaction in a community and context. There are, however, great variations in the way individuals engaged in their own learning within a community of learners. Motivation and strategies are also seen as factors that influence to individual level of engagement in online discussions.

The findings reveal different types of interactions and highlight different levels of individual participation and engagement in the online discussions. From the findings, the *Types of Online Interaction Model* is developed to show the different roles that individual might adopt in the online discussion environment. The adopted roles are the individual approaches and actions that contribute to personal learning during the online discussion. The roles are flexible and individuals are likely to move from one role to another when

there are reasons to do so. This study also shows the importance of the interactions that enable learning within the community. Two case studies discussed in this thesis illustrate the individual strategies of a provocateur and an eventual participant, which show how different ways of engaging in an online discussion community of learners contribute to individual learning.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

This thesis is an inquiry into students' learning from their participation and interaction within an online discussion environment. Research has been conducted to address problems relating to collaborative learning that could be achieved through computer mediated communication generally and online discussions specifically (Levinson, 2006; Matosov, Hayes & Pluta, 2005; Murphy & Coleman, 2004; Stacey, 1999; Puntambekar, 2006). Most of this research has focused on the social construction of knowledge and social learning, with an emphasis on group or community learning in the online discussion environment. This research focuses on individual student learning.

This chapter will present the background and significance of the research addressed in this thesis and in doing so will also outline the process of developing and identifying the overall research focus. "Activity Theory" (Leont'ev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978) was used as a framework during the research proposal as a means to identify gaps in the online discussion research. With both the existing research and its gaps, the journey to form the Research Questions for this thesis will be described with an explanation of the ethical issues that guided this study. Finally, an outline of the thesis structure describing the contents of the remaining chapters will be shared.

## **The Purpose of the Study**

Current research interests are always the result of complex interactions between various prior interests and accidents of personal histories (Walford, 2001). Likewise, this inquiry has been shaped by my initial commitment to fulfil the desire from the Malaysian government in optimising e-learning as one of the instructional methods in higher education. The government funded this PhD study as e-learning is quite a new area and little study has been carried out locally to guide the use of e-learning in higher education. The broad area of e-learning, especially in using web-based technology in teaching and learning, has been my major area of interest in conducting this PhD study. The study started with a general idea however the process of identifying the specific research area for this study led me to focus specifically on the online discussion area.

This thesis explores the impact on personal learning of the use of an online discussion format. Specifically, it seeks to contribute to the knowledge of how individuals learn from interaction and engagement in an online discussion environment. A review of the literature about online discussion revealed a deficiency in this area and the gaps found in existing research have lead to the development of this study's approach and design.

This thesis also reflects my own learning journey, as well as my participants' learning journeys in the online discussions. The process of interacting with others and making sense of the events that occurred made me increasingly aware of the importance of

learning within a context. By referring to learning by interacting with others, I viewed *others* as the bits and pieces I encountered during the research process, which include people, events, language, tools, and challenges that sculpt the whole study. This view is supported by Riel and Pollin (2004) with, “While it may appear that some learning is an individual accomplishment, in fact, even when alone the individual relies upon and is influenced by socio-cultural tools, signs, and symbols to make sense and produce work.”

The research did not occur effortlessly. Starting with one goal in mind, I eventually turned the research journey toward a different goal that enabled me to re-set the research focus. The significance of the study started with my personal background and interests and continued on to the critical incident that led to the thesis development.

When I completed my Bachelor’s Degree in Graphic Design ten years ago, my initial aim was to serve my country in the related field. As a Malaysian government scholar, I was committed to serving my country after I finished my study. Malaysian government policy at that time was to develop new courses (for example, Graphic Design and Industrial Design) in new Malaysian Polytechnic Institutes, which were under construction while the selected scholars were sent to do their degrees overseas. The expectation was for these scholars to return to Malaysia and be lecturers in the new Polytechnics. I was one of those scholars and when I finished my Bachelor’s Degree, I was invited to do a Master’s of Education in a Malaysian University. In Malaysia, to be able to teach in schools or

polytechnics, education qualifications are required (e.g. a certificate, diploma, degree or a masters in education). I completed a Master of Education degree to meet the requirement to teach in a new Malaysian Polytechnic. At that time, my personal goal was simply to gain my Master's and to work as a Graphic Design lecturer. To finish my Master's degree as planned I needed to be "an exam oriented person." Any personal interest in the educational settings was blurred by the need to gain the qualification. At that time I was desperately concerned with focusing on my own learning of the course content without the attempt to look in-depth at the discipline of education. Although the process of gaining the Master's degree triggered my interest in teaching and learning, the goal of gaining the qualification was more important at that time.

After I finished my Master's, I was immediately assigned to teach in one of the new Polytechnics and taught graphic design courses for four years before being offered the opportunity to do a PhD study. The experience of being an educator was precious in that it opened my mind to a different view of teaching and learning. Being in a real educational setting allowed me to experience different educational philosophies, and that really triggered my personal interest in teaching and learning. It also enabled me to see the great difference between doing something out of interest and doing something because you have to. This experience as an educator and the way in which it affected my views of teaching and learning, meant that I was ready to seize the opportunity of undertaking further study in education. The opportunity to do a PhD was a valuable opportunity to develop my personal interest in education.

### *Personal Significance*

Because of my graphic design background, I have always had an interest in computers and the Internet as teaching and learning tools, generally, and the interface design specifically. With those interests in mind, the process of deciding on specific areas of research started and turned out to be slightly different from the original plan and intention.

### **Significance of the Study**

Before I started focusing on the online discussion area, my interest was in the general area of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), especially in the area of interface design. In order to develop a focus for this study, I looked intensively at the literature on HCI during my research proposal stage. During the process of reviewing the literature on HCI, I found that Activity Theory was widely used as a means of organizing and guiding theoretical development to practical design in the HCI area. At the same time, I was also introduced to the online discussion area, which pointed me to a more specific area in the online learning environment. When I was first introduced to online discussions, my intention was to explore the interface design of the online discussion setting itself. The opportunity to be involved in two online discussion sessions extended my interest beyond the interface design. While still looking at the general area of HCI, I found myself becoming increasingly interested in knowing more about online discussions and how they are used in teaching and learning. I then looked specifically at the online discussion literature in order to get a clearer view of the area of research.

### **The Place of Activity Theory in this Study**

As I was newly introduced to the online discussions area during the development of the research proposal, I was not familiar with this area of research. As I began to look at this literature I realised how extensive and broad it was. I began to categorise the literature according to the similarities and differences of research areas. The crucial part in the process was to find gaps within the existing literature, and this was where Activity Theory proved particularly useful.

Activity Theory is a socio-cultural theory that is commonly used within the HCI area as, “a framework from which several ideas, theories and methods for conceptualizing human practices (activity) in relation to computers could emerge” (Mwanza, 2002, p.50).

Activity Theory does not provide specific categories or theories that can be followed by researchers. Rather, it provides a framework to understand the relationships that exist between individuals in human practices or activities within a context. As such, I found Activity Theory to be a good starting point to look at the online discussion research context. Activity Theory also offered the basic principles that constitute a general conceptual system in research, instead of a highly predictive theory, which triggered me to explore the different research areas in the online discussion environment. Although I did look at different theories in relation to HCI studies, such as Distributed Cognition, these theories did not provide appropriate conceptual tools for building the overall research context or help me understand the online discussion research area as a whole.



For example, Distributed Cognition looks at humans as key players in many phenomena of human society and is concerned with various and broader ranges of cognitive events that may be assumed to take part in cognitive processes (Hollan, Hutchins & Kirsh, 2000). Unlike Activity Theory, which examines the *activity* as the primary unit of analysis, there is no specific unit of analysis in Distributed Cognition and it provides only a complex classification of representations and processes in research. I found that a Distributed Cognition classification of cognitive events is too general and complex in order to be used as a framework to analyze the online discussion literature. Although there is a fine distinction between Activity Theory and Distributed Cognition, there is a lack of conceptual elaboration in the human activity system in Distributed Cognition. As such, Activity Theory provided a clear concept of this research context.

#### *Results of the Online Discussion Literature Analysis*

Using Activity Theory as a framework, an analysis of the online discussion literature identified a number of gaps in the research. One of these gaps is related to a personal understanding or personal construction of knowledge. The literature also provide little evidence of the construction of new knowledge or examples of negotiation in the discussions. Most of the research suggests that students' dialogues do not show that the individual is reconsidering ideas and making meaning - fundamental processes in higher order thinking. Only a small percentage of student contributions indicate higher order learning or consciousness of knowledge building. The literature review revealed that online discussion has the potential to augment students' learning through collaborative

learning, interaction and online learning activities. The literature also proved the usability of computer conferencing as an instructional tool and suggested different types of interaction and action in order to enhance students' learning. However, how much personal understanding is gained through the social construction of knowledge still remained unclear.

After the process of identifying the research gaps in online discussion research, the journey to form the research questions started. The process of developing the research questions went through various stages of revising and revisiting the research questions.

## **The Research Questions**

### *The Journey to Develop the Research Questions*

One of the gaps found during the research proposal was related to personal learning and that eventually became the aim for this study. I became interested in knowing how individuals learn in the context of online discussions. But to develop the research questions based solely on this research interest was problematic as the missing areas found in the online discussion literature were too general to start, and I needed to look at a more specific area for this study. To overcome this problem, I started to develop the research questions with one comprehensive question in mind: how do individuals learn from online discussions? From that question, I tried to frame more specific research questions for this study. I then tried to make connections from the existing research on

online discussion and individual learning. My involvement at that point in two online discussion groups was an opportunity to look further into the online discussion context and see how the research questions could be developed from there. Identifying specific and manageable research questions for this study was not an easy task. I started looking at the online discussion activity and considered how online discussion activity affected individual learning. I also wondered whether the existing literature about personal learning in the general context was connected to individual learning in online discussions.

The first version of my research questions was based on my curiosity as to whether the literature on personal learning in the general context could be applied to online discussions. I wondered whether there were similarities between learning in face-to-face discussions and learning in online discussions. I also wondered if individuals who are not active participants in face-to-face discussions might be more active participants in online discussions. In the online discussion area, research shows that when students are comfortable with the online discussion community and their interpersonal relationships, they will be able to participate, interact and negotiate actively during the discussions (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Richardson & Swan, 2003). Whilst looking from the general context of discussions and comparing it with online discussions, I also reviewed online discussion activities to determine how they encouraged individual participation in the online discussions. I was also curious about how the activities were designed and whether the designer considered the individuals who were going to be involved in online discussions. The above factors led to the first version of the research questions.

In my research proposal, I stated that, “during the research process I might intervene if necessary, in order to suggest an activity or discuss with the instructor how to improve the learning environment” (Abu Ziden, 2003). At that juncture, although I suggested that I might intervene during the online discussion activities, I was uncertain of the appropriateness of this approach. After I began the research process, I kept asking myself whether I should intervene or not during the online discussion activities and eventually decided not to. The main reason for not intervening was that I felt it was important to study how individuals learn in a typical setting designed by a course moderator. In looking at the online discussions as arranged by the course moderator, I hoped to grasp the spontaneity of the online discussion activities occurring without the interruption of an outsider.

For this reason I did not continue with specific research questions involving the design of online discussion activities. Instead, I began to look closely at students’ interactions, participation and engagement in online discussions to explore the ways those actions contributed to personal learning.

### *Final Research Questions*

The journey described above led to the final research questions for this study, which are:

How is personal learning facilitated through engagement in an online discussion environment?

- a. How is personal learning interpreted in the literature within the context of the community of learners?
- b. What are the relationships between a student's engagements in an online discussion environment and his/her personal learning?

### *A Brief Guide to the Individual Chapters*

This thesis is organised into seven chapters. This chapter (Chapter One) presents an introduction to the thesis by highlighting the significance of personal learning as one of the gaps in the online discussion context. This chapter also outlines the research questions and rationale for this study and indicates how the overall study and the thesis writing is organised so that its outcomes will convince and contribute to new knowledge.

Chapter Two (*Literature Review on Personal Learning*) provides a comprehensive review of several learning theories related to personal learning.

Chapter Three (*Methodology*) focuses on the philosophical and the theoretical framework for this research. The chapter presents a research model that grounds the overall thesis approach as well as illustrating the methodological decisions that influenced the development of this thesis.

Chapter Four (*Data Collection and Analysis*) illustrates the process of analysing the data by describing the process of identifying the participants, my role as a researcher, and reviewing the different layers of inquiry that emerged in the research context.

Chapter Five (*Types of Interaction in Online Discussions*) outlines the overall findings for this study through my development of the *Types of Online Interaction Model*, which illustrates the different roles that individuals adopt in online discussions.

Chapter Six (*Eventual Participant and Provocateur*) provides two case studies of an eventual participant and a provocateur, which are two key types of interaction found in this study.

Chapter Seven (*Conclusion and Future Works*) concludes the thesis by summarizing the findings, discussing the limitations of this study, and suggesting recommendations for future studies.

## **CHAPTER TWO: PERSONAL LEARNING WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF AN ONLINE COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS: A LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

The power of community is great. The power of a learning community is even greater, as it supports the intellectual as well as personal growth and development of its members. (Pallof and Pratt, 1999, p.163)

Pallof and Pratt's quote indicates a strong relationship between an individual and the community he/she is situated in. The field of online discussion can be seen as including two wide areas of learning; personal and social learning. The literature on online discussions has covered and investigated a wide area of research in social (collaborative) learning. However, individual learning and experience from participating and engaging in the online discussions environment is less explored. The use of the term "personal learning" in this thesis encompasses the idea of participating and engaging in online discussions for an individual's construction of knowledge and learning. The goal of this chapter is to discuss personal learning more clearly from a general context towards the online learning environment, which relates to the nature of learning processes through the interaction within a social context. The epistemological foundation of this study is based on constructivist and social constructivist learning theory (discussed in Chapter Three), which agree on the interweaving and situated nature of personal and social learning.



## **What is Personal Learning?**

Personal learning is generally viewed in the literature as an individual's cognitive and knowledge construction and her or his attempts to make meaning through involvement and interaction in a community and context. Although there is a distinction between learning in a general context and learning in the online environment, the interaction and learning experience, within either face-to-face and online, is seen as the main contributor to personal learning. Learning has also most commonly been connected to the individual construction of knowledge. However, there is still much about personal learning that we do not understand. Throughout this whole research process, the terms *personal learning* and *personal construction of knowledge* have presented a challenge in developing the idea of individual learning. Authors such as Papert (1993) suggest that knowledge construction is the “deliberate part of learning which consists of making connections between mental entities that already exist; new mental entities seems to come into existence in more subtle ways that escape conscious control” (p.105). However, the main process of learning according to Marchionini (1995) involves, “The mental structure which includes the input, processing, storage, and retrieval of information are the main processes that resulted in learning” (p.15).

Similarly, Marcum (2006) describes the development of theories of learning as a movement from theories about processes of learning towards the theories about interaction between individuals with and within the environment. Marcum suggested that,

Learning theorists whether professional or casual, steadily propelled the issue beyond the individual mind to the whole person (with emotion, traits, and personality), to stressing the role of language and communication, to the social mind of the community, to lifelong learning, to technology-enhanced processes, to comprehensive interaction and co-evolution with the environment (p.57).

The learning theories development and movement explained a broad dimension represented by the word learning itself. Illeris (2002) suggested that although the word learning is broadly used, it represents different meanings. Whilst Illeris divided learning into different categorizations, the three meanings are closely connected to one to another, which describe the stages of learning for individual. Within the three meanings suggested by Illeris: 1) the cognitive, 2) the emotional, 3) the social, both the process and results of learning are shaped by the social and physical context (interaction) in which learning takes place. Illeris also suggested that the three dimensions, “while different, are always integrated: the internal acquisition process and the external interaction process between the learner and the material and social environment” (p.9).

The two categories of learning from the literature that most relate to this study are: 1) learning as a cognitive construction of knowledge, and 2) learning as experiencing and interacting within a context. The literature points to various theories and discussions that either directly or indirectly define the experience of using online discussion as a cognitive (personal and social) tool. Learning as a cognitive construction of knowledge emphasises

the personal construction of knowledge that occurs within oneself, which relates to constructivism. Learning as experiencing and interacting within a context emphasises the social construction of knowledge and social processes, which relates to social constructivism. The literature also connects learning as a cognitive construction of knowledge and learning as experiencing and interacting within a context as interwoven with each other, which highlights the importance of the relationship between personal and social learning.

### *Learning as Cognitive Construction of Knowledge*

Literature on learning as cognitive construction of knowledge focuses on how we gain knowledge through individual reflections of our own mind and actions. The nature of the learner in learning involves individual intrapersonal and interpersonal levels (Vygotsky, 1978). Intrapersonal refers to the cognitive development of knowledge, which occurs within an individual and results in that individual's interpretation of various learning experiences and phenomena as described by Jarvis, Griffin, and Holford (1998) with,

Human learning is a wondrous phenomenon. We all do it. Very often, though not always, we know when we learnt something. But we can hardly know exactly what we are going to learn! Learning always has this vital dimension of creativity and unpredictability. When we start to learn something, we never know exactly where the process will take us. This makes learning exciting, innovative and valuable – yet at the same time challenging, risky and potentially threatening.

Learning can be threaten our own established ideas and understandings. And what is true for individuals is also true for groups, organisations and societies. They need to learn, but learning can also threaten them. (p.88-89).

When individuals receive information, the individual decides and processes the information as to whether to accept it as new knowledge or just merely information. Marcum (2006) suggested that information and knowledge are “qualitatively different phenomena. Information, basically, is discrete and objective; it exists whether or not we are aware of it. Knowledge, on the other hand, exists primarily in our minds, our beings, It must be processed and placed into context for it to have meaning. Information may or may not have meaning; knowledge always does” (p.25). Although the cognitive construction of knowledge occurs within oneself, according to Mercer (1995), talking to other people is a way to construct knowledge. Through talking, the knowledge that individual creates “carries with it echoes of the conversations in which it was generated” (p.83) and which could be seen as a social, historical process. However, Mercer stressed that the creation of knowledge does not occur simply through the talking process but “knowledge can be created out of the conflict of ideas” (p. 84). This study is based on the belief that learning as cognitive construction of knowledge does not occur in isolation within an individual. The iteration in experiencing and interacting within a context between an individual and others also could be seen as the bridge that connects a person and the knowledge the person sought.

### *Learning as Experiencing and Interacting Within a Context*

According to constructivist learning theorists, learning is an active social process that involves the interaction of individuals within a context. Johnson, Johnson and Holubec (1998) suggested that when individuals cooperate within a social context socio-cognitive conflict occurs, thus creating cognitive disequilibrium, which in turn stimulates perspective-taking ability and cognitive development (p.3). This suggests that learning is not a process that only takes place inside individual minds, rather meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities. The interaction of individuals within a context is also seen as the factor that enhances individual learning by the accessibility of “knowledge exchange,” which “is defined as the (perceived) contribution of one’s knowledge to others and the (perceived) acquisition of other’s knowledge by the individual(s) that produces new actionable insights for the individual(s)” (Faraj & Wasko, 2001, p.22). This suggests that knowledge is exchangeable and can be shared between individuals within a context. Wilson (1993) in Johnson & Aragon (2003) identifies three major premises of context and how these effect knowing and learning which parallel to the idea of knowledge exchange:

The first is the idea that learning and thinking are social activities that are structured by constant interpersonal interaction. Second, the available tools within the particular situation significantly guide an individual’s ability to think and learn. Third, human thinking is supported by interaction with the environment (p.38).

As the interaction between individuals supports individual thinking and learning, the need to engage learners in ways that support the learning process to potentially enhance the sharing of the communal knowledge. Oriogun, Ravenscroft, & Cook (2005) suggested that “one way of engaging learners in online collaborative learning is to create an environment in which knowledge emerges and is shared. The onus is therefore on the tutor/instructor to (1) create an environment in which knowledge emerges and is shared through the collaborative work within a group of students and (2) facilitate sharing of information and knowledge among members of a learning team instead of controlling the delivery and pace of course content” (p.198). By engaging within a context students are able to contextualise their ideas and perspectives and personal learning will then emerge from the individual’s negotiation and appropriation of communal knowledge.

### *Elements that Contribute to Personal Learning*

It is established in the literature that personal learning can be developed within personal and social contexts. However, there are also individual (personal) elements that are discussed in the literature, which are seen as contributing to learning for the individual. There are three areas covered by the literature in relation to contributing to personal learning: *personal dimensions*, *learning processes* and *learning product*. These three elements are related to each other and are seen as contributing to or hindering learning.

## Personal Dimensions

*Personal dimensions* are individual differences, characteristics and personalities that contribute to how individuals learn and acquire personal learning. Factors such as individual background (Lundberg, 2003), values, social status (Hirschy & Wilson, 2002), beliefs, prior knowledge and emotion are discussed in the literature as factors that contribute to personal learning. According to Hirschy & Wilson (2003), “social status can include the gender, race, age, and social class of the students and the instructor” (p.87). Lauzon, Gallant and Rimkus (2000) suggested that some cultures may prefer more oral environments (e.g. synchoronous online communication) while other cultures depend much more on nonverbal cues. They also suggested that, “often the dominant culture is normalized through educational practice and consequently this may create a ‘cultural’ tension for students who are not from the mainstream culture” (p.327).

## Learning Process

The *learning process*, in one sense, is the process of what an individual does in order to gain personal learning. Some of the previous research has approached the learning process as, “preparing for examination” (Enwhistle, 1998, p.5). Furthermore, according to Enwhistle, “this approach derived from an intention to obtain the highest possible grades and relied on organised studying and an awareness of assessment demand” (p.73). More recent research especially related to online learning environments shows that the pedagogical approaches also influence the individual student learning process. Factors such as motivation (Salmon, 2000), teaching and learning strategies (O’Niel, 1978;

Schmeck, 1998), adjustment to the learning environment (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes & Fung, 2004) and support from tutors or peers (Mcpherson & Nunes, 2004; Lundberg, 2004) are seen as essential during the learning process.

Although learning process and learning outcomes could be viewed as two different occurrences in learning, both are interrelated and intertwined during the knowledge construction process. Meyer (1998) suggested that, “learning in a relational and transformative sense is referred to here as ‘virtuous’; it is a complex multivariate phenomenon in both process and outcome terms; it is shaped by a web of dynamically interwoven influences, many of which are closed to external observation” (p.43).

Ramsden (2003) agrees that students’ learning outcomes are indeed closely related to the individual approaches they used and how they go about learning.

### Learning Outcomes

*Learning outcomes* refers to both quantitative and qualitative outcomes of the leaning process. The quantitative outcomes can be measured and observed (e.g. examination or assessment results, students’ portfolios, etc). The qualitative outcomes could be measured to a certain level, and are also observable. Tang (1998) suggested that, “in qualitative conception, learning is concerned with an insight into the subject, and new ways of thinking about the world. Learners actively construct meaning of the content to be learned, resulting in a change of their conceptions about the external world” (p.103).



Research related to learning outcomes has acknowledged two forms of students' understanding, which are called a deep approach and a surface approach. "Deep approach describes active involvement stemming from interest in the content which leads to an elaboration of the learning material in seeking personal understanding. In contrast, the surface approach suggests anxiety or extrinsic motivation driving routine memorisation intended to reproduced aspects of subject matter" (Enwistle, 1998, p.73).

What students learn is indeed closely associated with how they go about learning and is influenced by these three elements of learning; personal dimensions, learning process and learning outcomes. This study concentrates on the learning process and how the learning process within the context of a community of learners contributes to individual learning.

Within literature on the three elements of learning, I found that motivation and strategies are two important components to enable individual learning. As Table 1 illustrates, although the elements of learning are related to each other, motivation and strategies could be seen as interrelated factors that influence the accomplishment of each element towards personal learning.

**Table 1: Relationship between elements of learning and motivation and strategies.**

| Elements<br>of learning<br>Component | Personal Dimensions   | Learning Processes                    | Learning Product  |
|--------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| Motivation                           | Belief<br>Habits<br>Prior Knowledge<br>Intrinsic Rewards<br>Culture | Engagement<br>Involvement<br>Attitude | Extrinsic rewards<br>Individual performances<br>Value of the knowledge<br>gained, |
| Strategies                           | Individual Goals<br>Orientation<br>Attitude                         | Skills<br>Approaches                  | Good Grades<br>Knowledge<br>Skills  |

Within the personal dimensions, motivation is referred to as individual internal reinforcement in learning. Motivation in this area is related to personal psychological forces that enhance or hinder learning. Factors such as, beliefs about self (Bandura, 1997; Maggioni & Riconscente, 2003), culture (Youn, 2000) and personal attributes (Oxford and Shearin, 1994) are seen to influence individual levels of motivation in learning. The literature on personal dimensions has also linked individual goal orientation and attitude with the use of learning strategies in academic learning (Svicki, 2005; Algera, 2003).

During the learning process, motivation determines an individual's involvement and attitude towards learning. An individual with a low level of motivation is less likely to explore more during the learning process, while an individual with a higher level of

motivation is more likely to explore different approaches and strategies during the learning process. This is supported by Jackson's (1995) statement that, "Students are more likely to take a deep approach to learning when the motivation to learn is internal, coming from the student's own needs and desires" (p.67). This deep approach can result in developing more skills to work in a community context. To lead students to adopt a deep approach, the role of the teachers is important as stated by Bruckman (2006) with, "In order to support students' motivation during inquiry, teachers need to employ practices that both stimulate motivation and support students' cognitive engagement" (p.482).

Extrinsic and intrinsic rewards are learning products that motivate an individual to learn. Some students may focus more on extrinsic rewards such as qualifications, skills and performances, which differentiate their dispositions from students that focus on intrinsic rewards. Intrinsic rewards refer to the individual's sense of satisfaction and a learning goal in which the rewards come from both carrying out an activity and the result of the activity. Both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards result in different ways of individual learning approaches. Meyer (1995) suggested this with, "For example, an intention to understand may invoke an iterative process of reflection and critical conceptual interaction, while an intention to memorize information for subsequent reproduction in an examination may simply be realized by a process of repeated rehearsal" (p.114).

These elements of learning are supported by motivation and strategies in order for an individual to be involved in a learning context. As such, motivation and strategy are important factors that enable an individual's involvement in the learning process within the context of an online learning community.

### **Online Community Learning**

The literature on online community building and learning, in general, provided extensive descriptions about what and how the community provided the context towards the enhancement of individuals who shared the same interests and purposes. In the teaching and learning environment, the term, “community of learners,” emerges to represent a wide range of interests and motivations. Evans and Nicholson's (2003) study suggested four significant characteristics of community building:

- i. Students acquire greater understanding of teaching and learning through use of prior knowledge and experiences while working together on meaningful assignments.
- ii. Community helps our students build understanding of themselves and their histories as learners.
- iii. Strengthens the collegiality and sense of belonging that enables them to take risks as learners; helps them develop an appreciation and respect for the similarities and differences among each other.

- iv. It strengthens their student's resolve in their commitments to themselves, to their future students, and to the education profession (p.147).

Evans and Nicholson also found that students “have a clearly articulated individual philosophy of education which expresses their beliefs, values, and reasons for becoming teachers as a result of their involvement within a community. These significant outcomes for students are the result of developing as teachers within a community of learners that shares common goals, values, language, and milestone experiences” (p.148).

#### *What is an online community of learners?*

Although there are various definitions of community of learners, a learning community is usually guided by two important elements: (a) tasks to be fulfilled by the community, and (b) goals to be achieved through the collaboration and interactions within the community. It is considered that through the tasks and goals, the community members can construct their learning. In this thesis, I further define the community of learners as a community that is specifically designed for educational purposes in order to support learning processes. Personal learning in a learning community can be seen as developed from an individual actively participating, interacting, and communicating with others to reach certain goals or solutions for learning purposes. Cocklin (1993) suggested that, “in a community of learners, everyone is about the business of learning, questioning, investigating, and seeking solutions. The basis for human interaction is no longer a

hierarchy of who knows more than someone else, but rather the need for everyone to contribute to the process of asking questions and investigating solutions” (p.392).

Rasmussen and Skinner (1999) defined a learning community more towards a curriculum based community. They broadly defined a learning community as, “curriculum design which coordinates two or more courses into a single program of instruction” (p.36). According to them, the strength of learning communities is in the way educational experience is incorporated and made relevant to real world events, which enable the opportunity for students to see topics from multiple perspectives rather than from a limited standpoint.

Learning within a community of learners is also parallel to Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivism which involves learning as a social process through the interaction, shared knowledge and building individual understanding through the social construction of knowledge. Bonk and Cunningham (1998) pointed out that learning could be seen in three interrelated metaphors which are: (a) learning as information processing – a cognitive skills approach, (b) learning as experiential growth and pattern recognition – a cognitive constructivist approach, and (c) learning as a socio-cultural dialogic activity – a social constructivist or socio-cultural approach (p.26). Although Bonk and Cunningham proposed three interrelated metaphors in learning, I suggest that their (a) and (b) are embedded within each other and are not two different constructs. Seeing learning as information processing is actually seeing the process of constructing individual new

meaning making from the information received. As such, the word “process” itself shows the constructive development of the knowledge within the individual, and the product of the constructive process could be a new meaning gained from the process. It is important to highlight that the new meaning does not necessarily contain new information, new added information or new revised information. Rather, the new meaning is the new knowledge and learning for the individual after the cognitive constructive process has occurred.

A considerable number of authors have written about the benefits of learning within a community of learners including, increased opportunities for social construction of knowledge, shared experience, and support (Pea, 1994; Kaptelinin, 1999; Zieger & Pullichino, 2004). Ongoing community involvement is also seen as providing a sense of belonging and ownership that support the community. Additionally, interacting within a community contributed to individual critical thinking with a continual negotiation process. Stahl (2006) suggests that, “negotiation specifically, of what is to count as new shared knowledge – is a central phenomenon in cooperative work and collaborative learning” (p.177). Stahl further describes that, “negotiation is required to bring ideas back into consensus and to promote individual ideas to the status of group knowledge. So it seemed that integrating perspective and negotiation mechanisms and conceptualising negotiation as the intertwining of multiple personal perspectives to arrive at a shared perspective would mutually solve the central problems of these two mechanisms” (p.181). As such, personal learning is seen as benefiting from cooperation and collaboration within a community of learners.

## **Personal Learning within the Context of an Online Community of Learners**

### *Individual involvement in an online learning community*

As more and more learning communities are developed within the online environment, there is a need to understand how the involvement in a community of learners contributes to personal learning. It has been found that the involvement and sense of belonging in an online community of learners is beneficial to individual learning. Paloff and Pratt (1999) claim that, “in distance education, attention needs to be paid to the developing sense of community within the group of participants in order for the learning process to be successful. The learning community is the vehicle through which learning occurs online” (p.29).

As a learning community could be seen as a platform for learning, learners are considered as moving from novice users to more knowledgeable community members by becoming involving in the communal activities. Scardamalia & Bereiter (2006) provided six themes that motivated a shift from treating students as novice and receivers of information towards considering them as members of a knowledge building community. These themes are:

- i. Knowledge advancement as a community rather than individual achievement
- ii. Knowledge advancement as idea improvement rather than as progress toward true or warranted belief



- iii. Knowledge *of* in contrast to knowledge *about*
- iv. Discourse as collaborative problem solving rather than as argumentation
- v. Constructive use of authoritative information
- vi. Understanding as emergent (p.98)

Scardamalia & Bereiter (2006) further stressed that, “the proof of knowledge building is in the community knowledge that is publicly produced by the students – in other words, in visible idea improvement achieved through the students’ collective efforts” (p.113).

Sainsbury (1992) recommended that, “the context consists of aspects of the physical and social world, linked by theories to other aspects, to causes and effects, judgements and evidence. Only by classifying the context in this way can an action or communication be appropriate and meaningful” (p.55).

Although there are benefits for being involved in an online community of learners, Haythornthwaite et al (2000) found that students perceived that maintaining ties and community at a distance and via computer mediated communication requires more effort than in a face-to-face community. However, they emphasised the benefit gained from the collaboration by trying alternative strategies to overcome the socially-related resistance.

*The relationships between personal learning and the community of learners*

Although personal learning occurs within oneself, meaningful learning does not occur in isolation, rather it occurs and is situated within the context where an individual is located. Learning within a community of learners has the potential for individual opportunities to provide more meaningful learning, which can address both individual and collective needs. Sainsbury (1992) suggested that each individual interaction in a context, “involves an active application of meaning in a certain context. When the result of the interaction confirms the appropriateness of the application, there is always an addition to the personal perspective, for now the concept has been confirmed as appropriate in *this* context in addition to past context. The application of concepts to new circumstances always adds depth and range to personal meaning in this ways” (p.106). Sainsbury further implied that, “interaction in which meanings we are applying are duly confirmed are nevertheless a kind of learning, as there is a deepening and extending of our mastery of meaning in each context in which it is successfully applied” (p.107).

Holmes and Garner (2006) suggested that the community basis and communal constructivist process is the sustaining element that empowered learners to support their learning with shared expertise and shared knowledge creation, “thereby allowing them a role in their own education” (p.158). As such, personal learning can be seen as situated within the context of social learning.

The sense of belonging to a community is essential in a virtual teaching and learning environment. It is critical for the members of a virtual community of learners to be strongly attached to the community so they will interact and negotiate meaning within the community. The absence of visual and auditory cues in a virtual community, according to Pallof and Prat (1999), is relatively favourable as it enables participants to focus only on the meaning of the message conveyed by others. “As a result, ideas can be collaboratively developed as the course progresses, creating the socially constructed meaning that is the hallmark of a constructivist classroom in which an active learning process is taking place” (p.32).

Similarly, Lave & Wenger (1991) coined the term, “legitimate peripheral participation,” to show how individuals establish their involvement within a community of practice from a novice toward a more knowledgeable member through an intensifying process of participation in the community. Lave & Wenger’s legitimate peripheral participation approaches learning through the concept of “situatedness,” which individuals learn through the involvement and participation in a community of practice.

The strong relationships between personal and social learning provide the foundation that suggests that participation and involvement in an online community will contribute to an individual’s learning. However, how participating and engaging in this type of

environment is perceived as beneficial from the participant's point of view is less discussed in the literature.

### **Motivation and Strategies in Online Learning Environment**

Although participating in an online community is seen as contributing to personal learning, participation in the online learning environment requires more than physical participation. "In a learner-centred environment, the learner is truly expert when it comes to his or her own learning. Consequently, participants in the online learning community take on new roles and responsibilities in the learning process and should be encouraged to pursue knowledge whenever that path takes them" (Paloff and Pratt, 1999, p.162). In order to engage in personal learning, continuous participation and meaningful interaction in the community of learners is needed. Otherwise, the learning part would be neglected during the online discussion through participation only to obtain a certain grade or to satisfy a course requirement.

Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that motivation and strategies are interrelated factors that influence the accomplishment of each element toward personal learning. The literature in relation to learning within an online learning environment has also pointed out that strategies and motivation as two important factors in learning.

## *Motivation*

Students need to be motivated to be involved in the online learning environment.

“Individual level motivations and the building blocks for interpersonal relationships reside in the minds of participants”(Rafaeli, 1997). As Bransford (2000) suggests, “motivation affects the amount of time that people are willing to devote to learning” (p. 34). Salmon (2000) proposed a model of teaching and learning online through computer mediated communication and provided five stages of interactivity. In the model, Salmon indicated that the first stage towards teaching and learning online is “access and motivation” and that, “the participants needs information and technical support to get online, and strong motivation and encouragement to put in the necessary time and effort” (p.27).

However, I argue that Salmon’s suggestion that “stage one is over when participants have posted their first messages” (p.27), can not always be applied with regard to motivational purposes. Individual motivation has its ups and downs, especially in the online environment, and motivation is needed throughout the entire stage during the online learning process. The level and source of motivation for learning involves individual intrinsic motivation as well as extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation by tutors or more knowledgeable and experienced peers are seen as two important factors in encouraging participation and involvement of newcomers in using the online discussions. Salmon’s (2000) model of teaching and learning online through computer mediated communication offers ways to provide extrinsic motivation through e-moderating. “In

extrinsic motivation the student focuses on the outcome. With increasing importance being placed on outcomes in learning, especially e-learning, clarity of extrinsic motivators is critically important” (Salmon, 2002, p.18). Holmes and Gardner (2006) also agree that when learners are supported by members of a learning community throughout his/her learning process, “motivation of the learners to learn is increased and the learning process is made more meaningful” (p.158).

Holmberg (1997) proposed a theory of distance education which suggests seven characteristics of didactic conversation. One of the characteristics suggested by Holmberg is the importance of a personal relationship between the instructor and student to promote study pleasure and motivation. Good and clear communications between tutors or moderators and students in the online learning environment is one way to increase students’ motivation to participate and engage in learning. Parallel to Holmberg, Lauzon, Gallant and Rimkus (2000) stress the importance of extrinsic motivation to build up individual intrinsic motivation in online learning. They pointed out that the structure of assignments and participation may also affect learner motivation. According to them, learners would be unmotivated to participate further in an online environment after they have completed a task if they are being graded on participation. As such, they suggested that, “it is important to design for extrinsic rewards until the learner has sufficient experience to see the intrinsic rewards of participation in online education” (p.330). Students who are intrinsically motivated “are happy to take part in the activity for its own sake” (Salmon, 2002, p.18).

Learning processes, then, can be seen as influenced by motivation. While motivation is important to the learning process in an online learning environment, it can be very difficult for students to stay motivated over a long period of learning online. Roper (2007) stated that, “without direct physical contact and interaction with other learners or an instructors, online student can loose their interest or motivation mid-way through their course or program”. As such, Roper suggested that, “a new online student would be well advised to consider developing personal techniques for staying engaged, specifically by creating a self-motivated plan” (p.64). The most important part in Roper’s suggestion is not the motivation itself but how motivation is organized by individuals. When an individual builds a self-motivated plan in learning, the plan is “a personal motivation strategy” that keeps them from losing interest or burning out (Roper, 2007, p.65). It is noteworthy to say that strategies play a relatively important role in the online learning environment. To stay motivated, an individual needs to be strategically motivated towards their own learning because a “motivated teacher and a motivated student will succeed in any mode by developing and sustaining some form of effective engagement” (Ameigh. 2000, p.345). Thus, with motivation, individuals will be able to strategically plan their own learning processes and how to approach learning environments in their preferred way of learning.

### *Strategies*

Learning strategies refer to methods and approaches that students use to gain knowledge they seek. McPherson and Nunes (2004) suggest that in the online learning environment, tutors and learners need to be prepared in order to be engaged in the online learning activities. “These skills are not only required to succeed in the online learning environment to which learners are exposed, but are also an essential part of all aspects of daily networked activity” (p.45). Tutors’ or instructors’ strategies are discussed widely in the literature as one of the main factors in encouraging students’ involvement and participation in an online learning environment. Tutors’ strategies and roles such as e-moderating (Salmon , 2000), coaching (Murphy, Drabier & Epps, 1998), facilitating (Collison et al, 2000; Amiegh, 2000) and leading (Lai & Pratt, 2005) are suggested as ways to engage students in the environment. A study by Forret, Khoo & Cowie (2006) found three important themes relevant to pedagogical strategies, which would contribute to successful online teaching and learning. The themes include the importance of social interaction, the importance of social emotional context, and the importance of coherence and purpose. The importance of social interaction, according to them, involved “dialogue - the discussion and sharing of ideas in a way that constructed learning as a social process” (p.23). Whilst more research has suggested intensive tutors/moderators roles and pedagogical strategies to encourage students’ online involvement, however there is less research into individual’s adopted strategies for learning in online discussion.



Little of online discussion research refers to students' strategies in participating in online discussion. It is important to go beyond the tutors' strategies and see how students perceive their strategies towards learning in online discussions. Although these strategies might vary among students, how they perceive the strategies they use to gain knowledge is a key point in exploring personal learning in the online learning environment. Students who use strategies in learning can be perceived as students with learning orientations. Students who are learning oriented like new challenges, while those who are performance oriented are more worried about making errors than about learning (Brandford, et al, 2000). Nevertheless, it is not justifiable to assume that students with performance orientation do not use strategies in their learning processes. Students with performance orientations might have learning strategies that parallel their performance orientations. Despite this potential overlap of these orientations, this study will focus on learning orientations within online discussions.

## **Summary**

I close this chapter with two important findings from the literature. First, personal learning is seen to be affected by the environment and context an individual is in. Second, the interaction within a community is important to enable learning. Yet, the interaction within an online learning community will not exist if there is less motivation for individuals to participate in the community. When individuals are motivated to learn, it is possible for them to employ individual strategies for learning. Thus, the importance of the relationship between individual strategies and learning in the online learning

environment and the lack of research about that provide opportunities for this study to contribute to knowledge in the field.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### The Research Model

The overall design of this study follows a research model that is “characterized by researchers spending extended time, on site, personally in contact with operations of the case, reflecting, revising meanings of what is going on” (Stake, 2003, p.15). In order to determine how social and personal learning are closely related to each other in this study, it is necessary to understand how individuals fit into their contexts. To do so, a constructivist and social constructivist epistemology is the overarching theoretical framework, while the methodological aspects validate the rationale of the research design.

While this research began from the theoretical perspectives of Activity Theory, it gradually became apparent that Interpretive Hermeneutics was a more appropriate theoretical perspective for this study. All of these components will be detailed throughout this chapter.

The approach most suited to enacting those components of the research model for this study is qualitative because it can lead to an understanding of the different approaches that individuals have in learning by looking closely at individual experiences. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches would need a researcher to *infer*, which means to

pass a judgement, to use reasoning, and to reach conclusion based on evidence (Newman, 2000). However, a qualitative method provides the opportunity to be absorbed in the research, to be inside an unfamiliar territory and to build an understanding of the situation occurring inside that territory. By letting the data emerge, it is anticipated that participants' perspectives on their learning processes in the context of online discussions - what they do, how they describe the things they do and why – will value the individuals' stories and contexts.

### *Crotty's Research Model*

Crotty (1998) suggested a research model with four elements: (a) epistemology, (b) theoretical perspective, (c) methodology, and (d) methods. Crotty's definition of the four elements offers a framework which encompasses the philosophical as well as the practical features of a research study. The flexibility of Crotty's original ideas provide a foundation for the overall methodological direction of this study. Instead of pursuing any particular line of the research process more deeply, he opens up the opportunity for researchers themselves to lay out the research process based on their own preferences and research requirements by using the four research elements as basic guidelines.

### *Expanding on Crotty's Model – an Evolving Process*

Although Crotty provides the basic elements to be applied in a research process, these four elements do not appear to be sufficient in order to communicate the overall process

in this study. Crotty's research model only has the basic elements with little consideration as to how the elements inform one another during the research process. For this study, a fifth element of data analysis and interpretation is added to Crotty's model. Analysing and interpreting the data is an important element in this research as the data informed the methodological decisions. While trying to use Crotty's model, I found it did not provide for sufficient interactions among the four research elements in this study. Thus, to overcome this problem, a modified model was finally adapted through an evolutionary process.

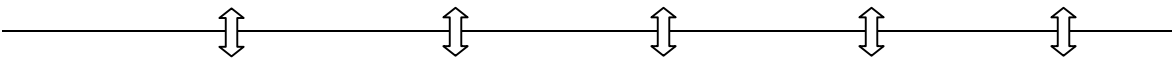
This modified model, using a whole-and-parts concept, was derived from hermeneutical theoretical perspectives and can be applied to all elements of the research model. For example, epistemologically, there is a two-way relationship between constructivism at the individual level and social constructivism at the collective level. Methodologically, individual events are inter-related to the collective research context. This concept suggests an invisible but powerful lens that frames the study. Without the whole-and-parts concept, personal learning could be researched in isolation from the social context. With it, personal learning can be seen as an individual part of the collective online discussion context throughout this study. As Lather (1991) stresses,

It is not a question of looking harder or more closely but of asking what *frames* our way of seeing when we do research – what are those spaces where visibility is constructed and from which we are *incited to see*, an incitement that marks the

operation of power-knowledge formations in the research process which makes a research as a signifying practice both post scientific or post-positivist and necessarily political (p. 22).

Table 2 further illustrates how this whole-and parts concept provides a way to consider how each element at both levels.

**Table 2: The research model representing the whole-and-parts concept**

| <b>Element</b>   | Epistemology<br>(Constructivism /<br>Social Constructivism) | Theoretical<br>Perspective<br>(Activity Theory<br>& Interpretive<br>Hermeneutics) | Methodology<br>(Phenomenology<br>& Grounded<br>Theory) | Method<br>(Case Study) | Data<br>(Analysis/<br>Interpretation) |
|--|---|---|--|------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <b>Level</b>   |   |   |  |                        |                                       |
| Individual   | (Personal)<br>Constructivism                                | Parts   | Events   | Individual<br>Case     | Individual<br>Student                 |
|  |   |   |  |                        |                                       |
| Collective   | (Shared)<br>Social<br>Constructivism                        | Whole   | Context  | Setting                | Groups                                |

In addition to that adaptation, attention was also paid to the relationships between the elements, especially with the iteration process that occurred during the research process. According to Crotty, the choice of epistemology delimits choices of theoretical perspective, which delimit other subsequent elements such as methodology and research methods. Crotty depicts this as predominantly a one-way process. However, this

relationship is not necessarily just unidirectional. The focal point of this research is the methodology. It is informed by the personal epistemologies of constructivism and social constructivism, which inform the choice of theoretical perspective, which inform the choice of methodology. However, the research is also informed by a three-way relationship between elements in the research model.

For example, the methodology informed the methods and how the data is analysed and interpreted in this study. But, both the methods and the data also informed the methodological decisions in this study. The three-way relationships illustrated by the arrows in Table 2 show how the methodology, methods and data informed each other in the research process. As the methodology used in this study changed from phenomenology to grounded theory, the way of looking at the methods and the data has been revised accordingly. However, it is important to highlight that the decision to adopt grounded theory as the methodology in this study has also been influenced by the process of looking at the methods and the data. As in grounded theory, the theory emerged from the data; how the data informed the methodology was a very important process in this study. The process of iterating between methodology, methods, data analysis and interpretation and going back to the methodological position again shows the importance of the three-way relationship in this study.

### The Final Research Model

The final research model adopted for this study is illustrated in Figure 1 which is the basis of the following discussions.

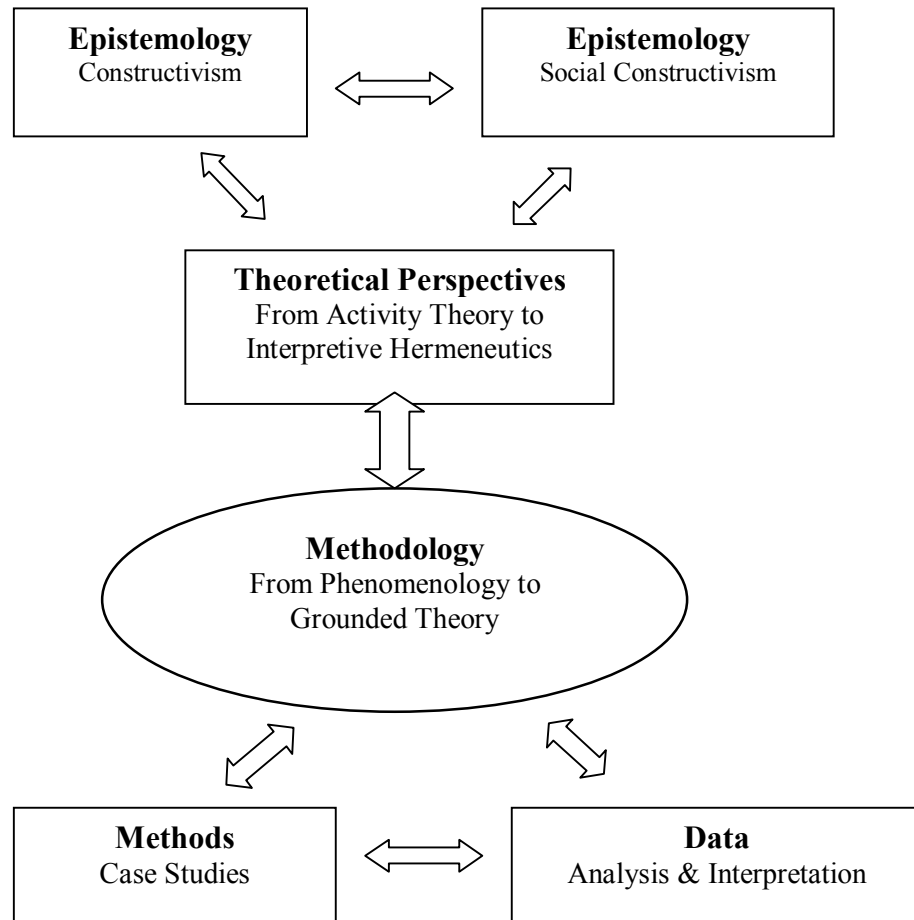


Figure 1. The Final Research Model



The final research model indicates the development of this study over time. In this study, every element of the research needs to be considered at both the individual and collective levels. For example, the individual student's learning must be understood within the collective group context of online discussions and individual learning events must be understood within the overall course context.

The research model determines where the research is epistemologically, how the research process is interpreted theoretically and how the approaches were adjusted during the research process and practice. Although the focus of this study is on individual learning, the importance of the whole context of the online discussion could not be ignored during the research process. Thus, the arrows in Figure 1 indicate the iterations between these individual and collective activities during the research process.

### *Epistemology - Constructivism and Social Constructivism*

My personal epistemologies are quite compatible with constructivism and social constructivism, although I did not realise this to begin with. In the online learning environment, generally, and in the online discussion context, specifically, constructivism provides the idea that a student is an active learner who constructs knowledge and understanding through individual involvement in the online environment. Schwandt (2003) distinguished constructivism and social constructivism as follows:

Constructivism is the ground for the individual meaning making process while social constructivism is related to social constructions of meaning. Constructivism perceived the meaning making in an individual's mind and social constructivism has a focus on social (community) meaning making through the interactions of individuals (p.292).

Participants in this study were located in a community with individual learning goals and different learning styles. However, the interaction process between individuals is seen as related to constructivism and social constructivism which occurs within the general e-learning and specific online discussion environments.

#### *Theoretical Perspectives – Interpretive Hermeneutics*

Whilst constructivism and social constructivism provided the significant epistemological position for this study, interpretive hermeneutics is a theoretical perspective that provided a context for understanding the research activities throughout the whole process.

Interpretive hermeneutics is related to the two epistemologies of constructivism and social constructivism in that meaning is made by connecting personal interpretations of knowledge in a social context. Within that context and for this study, language through text and dialogue is the main form of knowledge construction. For example, to understand how individuals construct their knowledge in a social context requires insight

into how individuals understand the situations they are in, including what their motives, goals and aims are in the learning process. This also includes the researcher's interpretations and participants' interpretations of their own experiences of learning within the research context. This interpretive process is described by Fosnot (1992) as follows, "In other words, experience, knowledge, and hence 'truth' are always a result of the constructed cognitive structures used in interpreting" (p.168).

Within the hermeneutic perspective, knowledge emerges from dialogue about practice, which offers a way to learn inside an interpretive circle by engaging with participants in an iterative inquiry. The underlying interpretive decisions in this study rely on the researcher participating in structuring the creation of new meaning interwoven with the participants' descriptions and experiences of their ways of knowing, which emerge from interpretive dialogues, critiques and related research activities. This approach is supported by Herda (1999) with,

One advantage of this method of investigation is that interpretation can provide a description of our knowledge, of the satisfactory and unsatisfactory conditions we have created normatively, while revealing false criteria that can be examined critically and acted upon (p.82).

The process of understanding the overall context in this research relies on the fundamental principle of the hermeneutic circle, which focuses on the relationships

between the subjects (or parts) and the object (or whole). The repetitive circulation between the whole and the parts involves discovering the meaning of parts in relation to the context. Herda (1999) suggested that parts and whole need to be understood in relation to the other.

The hermeneutic mode of understanding involves “a sharing of meaning between ‘the whole’ (communities) and ‘the parts’ (individuals) by situating hermeneutics within history and within culture” (Crotty, 1998, p.91). This study also focuses on interpreting individual experiences as they occur within the context of this research. Keeping the above definition of interpretive research in mind, hermeneutics is understanding the process of learning back and forth from the whole social process of interactions towards the individual process of understanding. The movement of understanding from the whole (context) to the part (individual) and the other way around is a continually circulating process.

### **Methodology: From Phenomenology to Grounded Theory (A Change of Direction)**

Given my interest in exploring how individuals learn from their interactions in online discussions, a phenomenological approach to this study seemed appropriate when I developed my proposal. It is their stories and their voices that this dissertation is based upon in the first place. The desire was for the only sound that a reader would hear in the dissertation was student voices. Further in the research journey, I found that I needed

more than just the participants' voices to discover how learning occurs from interactions in the online discussions. I needed more flexibility in the research design and new ways or frameworks to understand what was happening within the online discussion context. Grounded theory offered an alternative to the established ways of phenomenology in conceptualizing and conducting this study.

### *Phenomenology as a Starting Point*

During the process of developing the research proposal, I suggested that phenomenological research provided me with “a way of seeing through participants' eyes” (Abu Ziden, 2003, p.15). While it seemed to be justifiable at that time, my concern in using a phenomenological research approach parallels Gillham's (2000) suggestion that there would be a common discrepancy between what people say about themselves and what they actually do. That was when I decided to move on to a more flexible research design so that I would be able to look at this study from an additional lens to the participants' eyes.

### *Moving on to Grounded Theory*

One must discover their own pacing recipe for their research (Glaser, 1998, p. 50).

As Glaser suggests, the journey of discovery for every researcher is different and grounded theory is a framework that truly honours this. Grounded theory is an approach that develops theory from the data collected, rather than applying a theory to the data. “Grounded theory is about process rather than people and places” (Dey, 1999, p.7). Thus, grounded theory is most appropriate for this study for several reasons:

- i. Grounded theory is suitable for exploring a new area of research, such as in this study.
- ii. Grounded theory involves various methods of constant comparison which provide the flexibility needed in this study. “It also allows for varied fundamental assumptions, data gathering approaches, analytic emphases and theoretical levels” (Charmaz, 2003, p.270).
- iii. Grounded theory can be “applied to the study of interactions, actions and engagement in a process” (Cresswell, 1998 in Kezar, 2005, p.643 ).

Exploring different ways of seeing and looking at the context of the study using grounded theory leads to avoiding drawing premature conclusions and making generalizations in the early stage of the research process. I had few advanced presumptions or hypotheses before embarking on my research journey. In the early stage of the research, I provided guidelines in collecting and analysing the data and I hoped to discover new knowledge from the data that emerged throughout the research process and follow Glasser’s (1998)

approach of, “Grounded theory is the research discovery of what is there and emerges, and it is not invented” (p.78).

Grounded theory allows flexibility in the research processes and begins with a research situation. In relation to my study, grounded theory enabled me to look at the research situation of trying to understand what happened in the online discussions and how students managed their positions in those discussions. Grounded theory challenged me to not fix my mind during the research process. Rather, it allowed the flows of the research to influence me in generating and analysing the data. Although in my research proposal, I focused on the triangulation of the data from multiple angles, it did not limit my perception into a predefined conclusion. Instead, I found that it enhanced my thinking and allowed me to be reflective and more aware of what happened within the research context as stated by Strauss and Corbin (1990), “The main point in grounded theory is the process of specifying and linking conditions at all levels of the online discussions and making connections within the online discussions context – with consequences through their effect on interaction” (p.66). Although grounded theory is not so much based on new ideas or on original sources (because some ideas might be related to already known ideas), the process of making connections between ideas and new discoveries would establish new solid connections between existing knowledge and the new knowledge discovered in relation to how individual students learn in online discussions.

Charmaz (2003) suggested that grounded theory strategies allow for varied fundamental assumptions, data gathering approaches, analytical emphasis, and theoretical levels. Modifiability, which is one of the criteria for evaluating grounded theory established by Glaser (1998), allows for amendment and opened my study to modification as the data emerged during the research process. Glaser established four criteria in evaluating a grounded theory, which included: fit, work, relevance, and modifiability. These four criteria helped me evaluate my own research progress, especially while analysing the data. It was important for my study to not be prescriptive or rigid, and for me as a researcher to not make assumptions in advance of what might happen during the research. For this study, the research setting is unique for its own purpose and goals, and it is not comparable to other research settings.

The goal of grounded theory research is to construct theories in order to understand an occurrence or phenomenon. As such, I found it relevant to the development of this study because, “A grounded theory is durable because it accounts for variation; it is flexible because researchers can modify their emerging or established analyses as conditions change or further data are gathered” (Charmaz, 2003, p.271 ). Throughout this research, I tried to match my study to certain theoretical frameworks (e.g., Henri, 1992; Hara, Bonk & Angeli, 2000; Heckman & Annabi, 2005). The theoretical frameworks that I looked into included ones that specifically looked at online discussion contexts and that related to different contexts but similar in terms of a research focus.



While grounded theory provided an overall context for this research, reporting on the data through a case study method provided a detailed analysis of the findings. Although a case study is targeted at a specific event or individual, the cases in this study were not predetermined, rather they emerged during the research process.

### *Method - Case Study*

A case study is both a process of inquiry about the case and the product of that inquiry (Stake, 2003, p.136).

As indicated by Stake, a case study involves being interested in understanding by concentrating on a single case and the result of studying that case without comparing cases. The decision to use case study as one of the research methods in this study was appropriate because individual learning is the focus and it is best described with cases because “each person’s account of the world is unique” (Walford, 2001). This study involved the process of inquiring into individuals’ experiences and how they go about their own learning. There are several reasons for adopting case study as the research method in this study:

- i. Case study is often an appropriate choice for investigating a topic in depth.
- ii. It also provides alternatives to answering many questions recognized in this research within an exploratory means.

- iii. The investigation of a case can be evaluated, summarized and concluded to increase the potential and applicability of the findings in other context or settings.

The alternatives and exploratory means in using case study provided me with different ways of looking at and analysing the data within my research context. In this study, I needed to engage in an extensive iterative process and to look at how individuals learned in the online discussion context from many different angles and perspectives. This necessitated not being prescriptive in advance as to how to answer the research questions. To reach a certain level of understanding in this study also involved looking at my own experience and how I understood the online discussion context over time. It should be noted that the case study approach adopted in this study relies on the data collected through interviews with students, direct observation of the subjects during online discussions throughout the semesters and looking in-depth at their contributions in the online discussions. I was a novice in the online discussions context at the time of embarking on this study, but I came to the study with certain personal assumptions regarding the nature of the online discussion context and what would happen within that context.

As a final point for using case study in this research, it is important to be able to communicate the results of the analysis and the findings, and to ground this study as an emergent theory. Because this study is focused on individual perceptions and experiences of learning through online discussions, the events and findings related to the

process of individual learning would be based on what happened in the research context, with possibilities of transferability to other similar contexts or settings

Also, using case study as the method in this study lead to an exploration in collecting and analysing the data. The process of developing the research design was done prior to the actual data collection process, however, the process was ongoing. The process of revising and looking back at the research design was done in parallel to the process of analysing and interpreting the data.

#### *Data - Analysis and Interpretation*

The process of analysing and interpreting the data involved several experiences of “looking again” at or re-viewing what actually happened in the setting. These reviews involved looking at the data separately and in groups. The most important discovery during the process of looking at the data in this study was seeing the importance of the iteration process within a context. Thus, going back and forth in looking at the data resulted in the findings for this study.

While I was engaged in the practical activities of this research, the theoretical aspects were never left behind. Rather, the theoretical aspects became the points of reference for making critical decisions. One of the practical activities in this study involved determining the overall context, which occurred before embarking on this research.

### *The Research Context: Determining the Context*

#### Getting a course and participants

To explain the social world we need to understand it, to make sense of it, and hence we need to understand the meanings that construct and are constructed by interactive human behaviour (Usher, 1996, p.23).

Usher's statement suggests that in order to explain the social world that supports online learning we need to understand the meanings that are constructed through the interactions of individual learners. In order understand individual learning that arises from interactions in online discussions I looked for a suitable course to study. The courses for this study were two semester-long courses that were held in semester one and semester two in 2004. The first course was an introductory course and the second one a more advance course based on the first one. The teaching for both courses was provided through lectures, workshops and the online discussion using a Web Course Tool.

Web Course Tool (WebCT) is a web-based programme that is used at the university to complement classroom-based courses. It is a space for students to work through ideas and concepts at their own pace and time. WebCT also housed videos of each lecture from the courses, which were available to be viewed by students on computers on the university campus. In the courses involved in this study, all students were assigned to several small

online discussion groups. They were given a question to consider and discuss at the beginning of every week for ten weeks. The participants in this study were being observed by me for two semesters during their involvement in WebCT discussions for the courses. Although WebCT provided more tools than just online discussion, in this study, I concentrated on that component of WebCT.

Participating in the WebCT online discussions was 5% of the total grade for the two courses being studied. As stated in the assessment information of the Course Information (*please refer to Appendix A-1*) provided to all students in the courses:

WebCT discussions are designed to complement the learning you are doing in lectures and workshops. They are your space to work through ideas and concepts with your fellow students at your own pace and in your own time. Discussions will be assessed based on: the length of discussion postings (at least one paragraph per post); quality of post (on-topic and relevant to the course material); and the number of posts (minimum number 10). They make up 5% of your final assessment (Course Information 2004, Section 4, p.8).

The Course Information document also provided an introductory guide to WebCT with information for students on how to use WebCT generally, as well as some tips on engaging in online discussions. There were also some ethical guidelines covered in the

Course Information in order to provide some general information about behaviour in the online discussions such as proper use of language and courtesy.

There were more than three hundred students in each course. Students were divided into groups for the WebCT discussions under three different tutors who moderated up to four groups each. The groups consisted of up to thirty students per group. Participants for this study were recruited through open invitations announced by me in the workshops in semester one. In that first semester, students from four specific groups were approached for this study. The reason for approaching those four groups was that they were all moderated by the tutor who agreed to participate in this study. The open invitations in the first semester resulted in twelve students agreeing to participate in this study. Of those twelve students, six enrolled in the advanced course in semester two and agreed to continue participating in this study.

As the focus of this study is the online discussion sessions, I looked at the weekly online discussion component in WebCT. Each online discussion session consisted of a weekly discussion of a topic that was presented and discussed in the lectures and workshops. The online discussions consisted of 5% of the overall marks for the courses. Every week the tutor would post a question related to the weekly topic for ten weeks. By posting the required one post every week, the students would get 0.5% of the overall 5% mark that was allocated for the online discussions component.

### *The Researcher's Role*

#### Onlooker Observations – Being the Observer

Although I did not participate in the online discussions in the course, I was given permission to observe the activities throughout the two semesters. Being an onlooker and observer enabled me to be present in the online discussion setting and closely observe the interactions that occurred. Jorgensen (1989) suggested that,

as a participant, the researcher must sustain access once it has been granted, and maintain relationships with the people in the field. The relationship between the participant as observer, people in the field setting, and the larger context of human interaction is one of the key components in this methodology (p.21).

My existence in the online discussions setting in this study was invisible in the eyes of the non-participants in my study. I was only visible to my research participants' eyes outside the online discussion setting. For example, when I needed some clarification from them, I contacted them outside the online discussion context, by telephone or email.

As an onlooker observer, I was in there in the setting, but my role in the study was as an outsider. Crossing borders can be difficult if one is an outsider and there were some challenges during the research about directly approaching students when interesting events occurred. The process of understanding my own roles in the research took time,

proceeded slowly, and involved times of less direct activity. I became satisfied with my role in observing the settings, which involved many observations and recording routines, unusual activities and interactions as they occurred naturally and spontaneously in the online discussion setting. I had no personal stake in what occurred but I felt that I was sufficiently detached to the context as a member of an audience.

The data collected as an onlooker observation contributed to answering my research question of, “what are the relationships between a student’s engagements in an online discussions environment and his/her personal learning?” This was especially true in order to grasp the spontaneity of individual engagement in the online discussions activity. I felt that it was important to study how individuals learned in their usual settings without any intervention from me as an outsider. In making that decision, I realised that my intervention would most likely affect students’ individual learning. In one regard, I looked at myself as a novice moderator who might not intervene during the online discussions because of the unfamiliarity in moderating the online discussions. I suggest that novice moderators, from my observation, are not likely to explore the online discussions in the first instance they are involved as moderators, but they will take their time to understand the existing activities before going on further. In contrast, I might have prevented students’ learning by not intervening in the online discussions if there were connections to be made between the activities and the individual learning process.



### *The Observation Process*

To start with the data collection process, I began by familiarise myself with the context of the study. There were twelve students and a tutor involved in this study. The context of the course is hybrid in nature, in which there were lectures, workshops and WebCT as one of the assessment components. I was keen to discover more about the course and how it operated. Attending and observing the lectures and workshops opened my overall views of the course to see how individuals were connected to each other in both of the major contexts. I tried to make myself invisible for most of the time during the observation, along the lines of what Scott & Usher (1999) described as, “a purely observational role in observers seek to detach themselves from the social setting being investigated” (p.101).

The purpose of being invisible was to acclimatize and familiarise myself to the actual setting of the research, as well as to avoid the influence of my presence towards the actual activities in the setting. Scott & Usher (1999) described this approach as,

the intention is to behave as a fly on the wall and not disturb or change what is being studied. Except for the purpose of gaining access, the researcher interacts little as possible with participants in this research. There are three reasons for this. First, this detached stance allows observers to gain a more comprehensive view of what being observed – they are less likely to be influenced by the agendas of participants. Second, this stance allows observers

to become more detached from their own specific agendas and from the way they are positioned (i.e. in terms of age, sex and ethnicity) in relation to the subjects of their research. Third it allows them to gain a more objective view of reality being investigated. As with any instrument, there are epistemological assumptions underlying its use. These assumptions comprise a belief that the preconceptions and viewpoints of observers should not play a part in the particular construction of reality. Researchers are able to bracket out their own values and represent a reality which is not dependent on them as researchers. They merely act as conduits (p.101-102).

From my observations, I found that individuals did not obviously connect nor interact with each other in the lectures. The interaction within the lecture hall was almost always one-way and students were seldom encouraged to participate in the lecturing activities. In terms of how individuals were located in the lecture hall, there were groups of individuals and there were also spaces between individuals. When I first attended the workshops, the environment was almost similar to the lectures but with smaller groups of students.

Although there was opportunity for interaction between students and tutor during workshops, I found that students were still passively involved in the teaching and learning activities. When a topic was open to discussion, I found that there were students who did not get a chance to contribute for several reasons such as, time constraints, the size of the workshop's group and the discussions were dominated by certain active and fast students.

Parallel to attending the lectures and workshops, I also observed the online discussions for the course. The only difference between the lectures and workshops and the online discussions was the fact that students and tutors were not required to be present at the same time and at the same place. Rather, they provided the flexibility of time and place. Every student was provided with opportunities to be involved in the discussions regardless of when or where they were located and whether or not they had the ability to voice their ideas face-to-face or in public. I also viewed online discussions as a way of providing students with individual spaces that were embedded in a learning context with chances to discuss and contribute to a topic at their own learning paces. For the online discussion component in this course, the tutor posted a weekly question to be discussed by the students. The questions were related to the weekly topics presented and discussed in the lectures and workshops. The online discussion in this course could be viewed as an extension to lectures and workshops in which all students would have the opportunity to go in-depth into the topics discussed in the course.

After one semester of observations, I conducted an interview with each of the six students and the tutor that was involved in this study. My observations continued for the second semester course and two interviews with two students each were conducted at the end of the second semester. The next chapter describes the interview development and processes for this study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS**

### **Introduction**

In Chapter Three I discussed the methodological decisions for this study and highlighted the overall framework for this research. The methodological decisions provided the research strategy that sculpted the overall research approach planned for this study. Consistent with the whole-and-parts concept of this study, this chapter will provide details of the journey through the data collection and data analysis processes. The process of collecting and analyzing the data in this study opened up entirely new insights for me. My own learning in this research is shaped by the knowledge created during the research process.

In writing this chapter and the other ones, I also came to the realization that even the thesis writing process is a journey of getting to know and making sense of what occurs within the hermeneutic circle. The writing process was a continuous process of exploring, orienting, and adjusting parts of the research towards the whole story for this thesis. I also realised that I was engaging in a hermeneutic process not only for the research, but also for my learning. A very interesting discovery was made in relation to the whole concept of this thesis: the whole-and-parts concept. I found that not only does the process of looking at research involve looking at the whole and the parts, but it also applies to the process of writing this thesis. While writing the chapters separately, I found that I could not focus on individual chapters without looking at the previous or next chapters. The

part was lost without the whole. In order to write a chapter and construct meaning within it, I needed to know the direction of the individual chapter. But, I was not sure of the direction of the individual chapters until I looked at the other chapters. This was because the chapter needed to fit in a context, this thesis, in order to be meaningful. The individual chapters may have direction, but they are not truly meaningful until they are put together to form the whole. In this way the notion of the hermeneutic circle is central to this study.

Consistent with the whole-and-parts concept of this thesis, a similar categorisation happened during the process of analysing the data. During the data analysis, the process of looking at different parts of the data separately and then making connections between the parts occurred repeatedly and continuously. This chapter describes the process of determining the context for the study and identifying a suitable course and participants for this research. The data collection process involved observations of online discussions, interviews with course participants and an invitation to them to write individual learning journals of their online discussion experiences. This led to the overall context of inquiry that emerged from the data collection. The emergence of this context of inquiry led to the data analysis process and was involved the process of identifying and interpreting an event or events in this study. Additionally, the processes of looking at an event or events, making connections and opening up to different ways of analysing the data is examined. Finally, there is a reflection on the data analysis process, which involved triangulating data from online discussion threads, interviews, students' learning journals and my own

research journal. The data analysis process demonstrated the importance of the relationship between individuals (parts) and context (whole) in this study.

## **Data Collection**

### *The Interview Process*

Observing and making assumptions on what occurred in the online discussions was less complicated for me in this study than the interviewing. Conducting interviews required me to be observant as well as participating and interacting with the interviewees. The interviews were used as a method of data collection in order to examine how individual actions in online discussions contributed to personal learning. During periods of observation, I found myself looking closely at students' interactions, participation and engagement in online discussions but observation alone was not sufficient to understand why students acted as they did. Students' personal experiences of learning through online discussions needed to be explored from the onlooker observation perspective in order to answer the research question.

The process of conducting interviews as a method of data collection was an important learning process for me. Prior to doing this study, I felt quite reluctant to be involved in a qualitative research study that required me to conduct face-to-face interviews. I felt it was easier to deal with questionnaires and numerical quantitative data rather than with human perceptions and experiences. The reluctance to do an interview might also have been

caused by my awareness of the relationships and interactions involved between the interviewer and the interviewee. To build a strong interviewer-interviewee relationship in an interview would be a very hard task. To be able to interpret instantly during the interview conversation and to be very alert and sensitive in listening and responding to the interviewee was my biggest challenge. In particular, I felt that my conversational skill in English was problematic. I feared that I would not be fast enough to feel the movement and the rhythm of the interviews. I was also conscious of the fact that the lack of interview skills could result in insufficient information being gathered during the interviews. I was concerned that my potential inability to capture important transactions in the interview conversations might cause me to lose important data needed in the study. The skill of careful listening to hear the meaning of what I was being told may not have been a big problem, but not being sensitive to what was being said and not being able to probe further could have been. Before I started this study, I wrote in my journal about how apprehensive I was of interviewing participants, fearing I might not do it properly. I wrote:

I might even feel nervous about contacting the first student that I should interview. But luckily there is email these days, so I hope that it will be easier to be able to contact the student through email rather than contacting her by phone (which would make me feel quite intimidated). ... sometimes I think about how much easier it is to sit in front of a table and look at a pile of documents and

sorting them out, rather than to work closely with another human (My research Journal, 6/8/04).

I do not think I would have been so hesitant if the interviews were to be conducted in my first language of Malay. In spite of my hesitation, I realised that in order for me to better explore individual student learning in online discussions, I should conduct the interviews and make my own learning process transparent. Because of the concerns expressed above, I decided to use structured interviews by formulating the interview questions in advance. While I realised that structured interviews might limit flexibility and responsiveness, I decided that it was the best way to cope with my own self-consciousness in conducting the interviews.

#### Developing the Interview Question

The process of developing the interview questions was as difficult as having to make the decision to conduct the interviews themselves because I needed to craft questions that would help students unpack their learning processes in online discussions. At the end of the first semester, I designed two sets of interview questions, one for the students and one for the tutor. Of the twelve student participants in this study, six students had agreed to be interviewed at the end of semester one. At the end of the second semester, I designed another set of interview questions for two of the six students that were interviewed in semester one. These two students had agreed to be interviewed again in the second



semester. The interview questions for the second semester were designed to lead on from the first semester's questions. Some of the questions were repeats of those I had asked during the first semester's interviews. The main reason for asking the same questions was to ascertain the degree of continuity or change between students' responses in the first and second interviews.

### Conducting the Interview

The students were interviewed individually and each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. The interviews were taped and the length of the interviews varied between 40 minutes to an hour. The six participant interviews provided a starting point for looking at patterns that emerged in the online discussions. Being able to talk to six different people enabled me to confirm observations I had made in the online discussions. After the interviews with the six students, an interview with the tutor was also conducted to gain more information on various themes emerging in the study.

During the interviews, students were asked questions regarding their personal backgrounds, their general understandings about learning, their experiences with online discussions in the course, their personal learning through the online discussions and general questions about online learning. The first interview session was definitely a test for my own interviewing and communication skills. I felt that I was not fast enough to invite answers from the interviewee and I was more self-conscious than I thought I would

be. However, along the way, I found that the process of interviewing had also become a journey for myself. Although the interview sessions did not really become easier over time, the learning part of the interview process did become an important aspect of this research. The second interview was directed at the tutor in order to gain perceptions on the teaching and learning experience as an online tutor. The tutor's interview also sought to highlight her perceptions on how students learn online.

### *The Journal Process*

Data were collected from two types of journals: student journals and my own research journal. The student journals involved two of my participants writing their personal accounts of their learning experiences in the online discussion. My own research journal reflected my observations of the online discussions.

### *Student Journals*

The student journals in this study were a simple and straightforward way to get participants' views. They were a record of students' individual thinking and experiences in relation to their involvement and participation in the online discussions. While my intention was not to burden my participants with more work than they were already required to do in the course, I hoped that they would be able to reflect on their journeys of being involved in online discussions. For example, the journals could describe how they integrated the content, process, and personal feelings related to online discussions.

The intention was for students to reflect on the learning journeys rather than on the content of what was learned. The message that I gave to the students was that they could write the journal whenever they had spare time, perhaps after they had completed the weekly online discussions topics or after any incident that they felt appropriate to include in the journal. The students' used their journals to also collect experiences and reflections on the learning process on a regular basis, based on their personal reflections and feelings. Although I was hoping that more than two participants would be willing to write a personal journal, I realised that the task was not an easy one and being able to get the involvement of two students was more than I could have asked for. As being involved in this study was a voluntary undertaking, I understood that writing a journal involved an ongoing commitment from the students.

#### Researcher's Journal

The researcher's journal reflected all the daily and weekly observations and my thinking during the data collection and analysis process. The journal included my own personal thoughts and field notes on the occurrences within the research context. In the researcher's journal, I examined and analysed the content of my own research journals throughout the ongoing research experiences. From this information, the dominant patterns that emerged from the data emphasized the need to look from different perspectives by triangulating the journals, the interviews and online transcripts.

Triangulation of identifiers, patterns and categories between the journals, interviews and

online transcripts served as an affirmation of representation of reality of the data collected in this research.

### *Different Layers of Inquiry*

This thesis is very much an exploration of how individuals locate themselves and engage in online discussion in order to learn. It is also a reflection of my own learning journey throughout the development of the thesis. From the observations to the interviews, I found that my research context developed a different layer of inquiry. Given the broad context of the research, data analysis was an emerging process. I started with a broad view of the context and without a prescriptive notion as to how the research would conclude. Initially, the planned journey of the research was indefinite. I tried to be open to possibilities that evolved during data collection from different sources. In the end, I found that my research process took the shape outlined in Figure 2 where the broad possibilities open to me at the start of the two semesters was gradually refined, through observations of online discussions and interviews with participants to a focus on the case studies of two individual students. This gradual change in focus has led to the personal learning reported in this thesis.

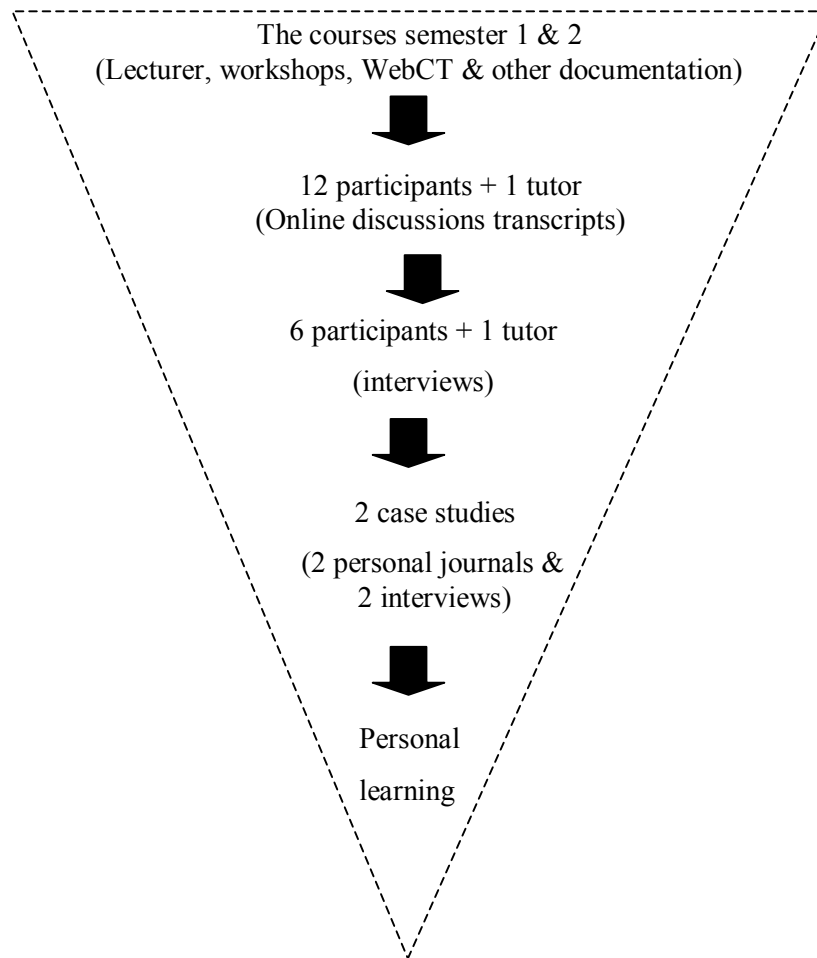


Figure 2. The overall context of inquiry for the study.

### The Course (Semester One and Semester Two)

The point of looking at the whole context of inquiry is to draw attention to the emerging process of the research and to the relationships between the context and the individuals in this study. The process of determining the context and participants for this study was not an easy one. The course involved in the study consisted of two integrated undergraduate courses in two semesters (semester one and semester two). Both of the courses consisted

of three components - lectures, workshops and WebCT. Data were collected from the lectures, workshops, WebCT site and other documentation to facilitate triangulation.

### Twelve Participants and the Tutor

In the first semester, twelve students and a tutor agreed to participate in the study. I gathered data through my observation of the lectures, workshops and the WebCT online discussion. The involvement of the twelve students and the tutor was observed closely especially in relation to their participation and contribution in the online discussion. At that stage, observation was the main research activity to enable me to establish the rhythm of participant involvement in the online discussions.

### Six Participants

At the end of semester one, six students and the tutor agreed to be interviewed. Two series of interviews were carried out consisting of two sets of interview questions; the first set was for the students and the second set was for the tutor. The first interview series was aimed at the student participants to gain understanding of their experience of learning using the online discussions. The students were interviewed individually and each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. The six participant interviews provided a starting point for looking at patterns that emerged in the online discussions. Being able to talk to six different people enabled me to confirm observations I had made in the

online discussions. After the interviews with the six students, an interview with the tutor was also conducted as to gain more information on various themes emerging in the study.

### Two Case Studies

Although not originally planned in the study, I approached two participants for a second interview based on my observations of their distinct patterns of engagement in the online discussions. One of the participants was an active user of the online discussions and the other was a moderate user. The two participants were then analysed as the case study for this research. The second interviews provided much more insight and detail than the first in relation to the two students' extended experiences in learning in the online discussions in the second semester. All the interviews were later analysed to determine recurrent themes or patterns. Detailed analysis of the two participants' experiences provided insight into the personal learning gained from participation and involvement in an online discussion environment.

The data collection process for this study was undertaken parallel with some preliminary data analysis processes, especially associated to the observation of the online discussions. While doing the observations, I also tried to make sense of certain events in the online discussions immediately after they occurred so that I would be able to see issues as they happened as well as to grasp the important occurrences within the discussions.

### *The Limitations of Using Case Study*

This study did not set out to establish generalizations. Instead, it has interpreted the findings from one setting in ways that might enable tutors and students to enhance their understanding of the potential value of online interaction. However, the findings of this study can also provide insights for other courses depending on the environment and teaching strategies. The results of the two case studies are relevant to the two students involved and the stories illustrated are the stories of those students. For other individuals, the findings and the stories might be different and might present alternative ways of engaging in the learning process in an online discussion environment.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process involved three main, interrelated phases. The first steps involved looking closely at what happened within the online discussions and determining patterns of participation and engagement occurring in the transcripts. The process for the online transcripts involved looking at all the study participants' contributions in the online discussions and making connections between students' postings to reveal what happened during the process. The second step involved looking at the transcripts of those students who had been interviewed. The third step involved comparing and making connections between the outcomes of the analysis of the online discussion transcripts and the interview transcripts. I found that within these three individual phases there are phases of analysis that need to be looked at. It was another occurrence of hermeneutic interpretation of the whole and the parts in this study. It was a realization that whenever



and whatever I did in the research process, the whole and the parts could not be separated from each other.

There were two main sets of data to be analysed in this study; online discussion transcripts and the interviews. Despite the fact that the two seemed to be simple and uncomplicated events, I found I had many questions: Where should I start? What is important? Should I look on only an individual level first or should I look at the context? Then I discovered there are events within the event!

### *Online Discussion Transcripts*

At the beginning of the data analysis, I made a naïve assumption that I would be able to look at individual learning by analysing individual participants as the main unit of analysis. Presumably, by looking at individual students and their contributions towards the online discussions, I was hopeful that I would be able to see the individual patterns of how they go about learning in the course generally and in the online discussions specifically. The attempt to analyse the data started with the online discussion transcripts. These transcripts provided the content, participants' positions in the discussions and evidence of individual contributions. I divided the process of analysing the online transcripts into two grounded ways: analysing the content of participants' contributions and analysing students' approaches and patterns of participation.

### Looking as Parts: Pulling Out the Online Contributions

During the initial analysis I tried several ways of analysing the participants' interactions in the online discussion transcripts. I did not look at the transcripts in a particular way at that stage, rather I explored ways of analysing the transcripts. I worked my way through all of the online transcripts and their content and deliberately tried to look at individual students' contributions separately from the group contribution. I selected one student's posts for the whole semester in an attempt to analyse them separately, independent of other students' contributions. I thought at the time that it would reveal the meaning of what the individual was trying to bring to light without having to pay attention to what others were saying. Table 3 shows Cindy's (Cindy is a pseudonym, as are all names used in this thesis) contributions that have been pulled out of the overall thread in one of the weeks (week 4). Cindy started her contribution in the middle of the week's discussions. Her first post for week four was the 21<sup>st</sup> message of the overall thread. That indicated that there were 20 messages posted by other students before Cindy posted her message. When I looked at her first message in isolation from other earlier contributions, I was totally lost! I wondered what other students had discussed before hand, what had happened and what were the actual questions posted by the tutor. The isolation of the individual postings did not show the information that I needed to understand Cindy's messages. In addition, I found that when the connecting parts and the group contributions to the discussions were not there in the message, there was no support for the individual contribution.

**Table 3: Cindy's contribution to the online discussions in week 4**

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|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| Week 4: Message No. 21 | Well Tommy - if you are doing this to just annoy people and get the feeling going then you have succeeded. At least you are being honest and passionate. Personally, I think you are a little misdirected ... (explanation) ... you most likely have a very narrow perception of ... (explanation) ....By the way with someone in your family was an immigrant at one stage ... (explanation)   |
| Week 4: Message No. 23 | Yes I have been to the places you have been to - and many more. I too have lived in a non-English speaking country.<br>..... (long explanation) ... ..<br>..... I think your opinion is probably along those lines, that if ... (explanation) This I agree with.<br>.... NZ has a great and very ... (explanation) . It was great to ... (explanation)...   |
| Week 4: Message No. 25 | Now for my own view!!<br><br>I was raised in an area which had a large influx of Indian and Pakistani peoples during the 1960's. Racial tension was high for many years. ... (explanation) Over the years I have come into contact with all sorts of races, religions, colours and in different situations. Frankly, it all comes down to education and dispelling this inherent fear of the average ... (explanation)<br><br>New Zealand does not (I feel) have a real immigration problem... (explanation)... You don't move to a totally different country if you know you are going to hate it there. I am an immigrant and moved here for a better lifestyle and opportunity - this is what the majority of immigrants do. I could only ... (explanation)... this has it's advantages. |
| Week 4: Message No. 31 | Well Beatrice, what a good subject to get people talking!!! These opinions are all made behind the safety of the computer - but do you think they would be as passionate in a face to face situation? Talk is one thing but conviction is ... (explanation)... Maybe the next WebCT question should be ...?   |

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I tried the same procedure with other participants' contributions and found that I faced the same problem in understanding the individual postings. Even when the students were just answering the tutor's questions, I found that it did not make sense to just look at all of the student's postings on their own. At the very least I found myself asking: what was the tutor's question and did he/she agree or disagree with the tutor's question and what was the rationale for his/her answers? Table 3 shows the example of tension that occurred while analysing the content of one student's weekly contributions to the online discussions. It also shows my awareness of how connections could be built up from only one statement from an individual. Additionally it shows the relationships between one person's statements to the other person's statements and the unclear representation of the content when it was analysed in isolation.

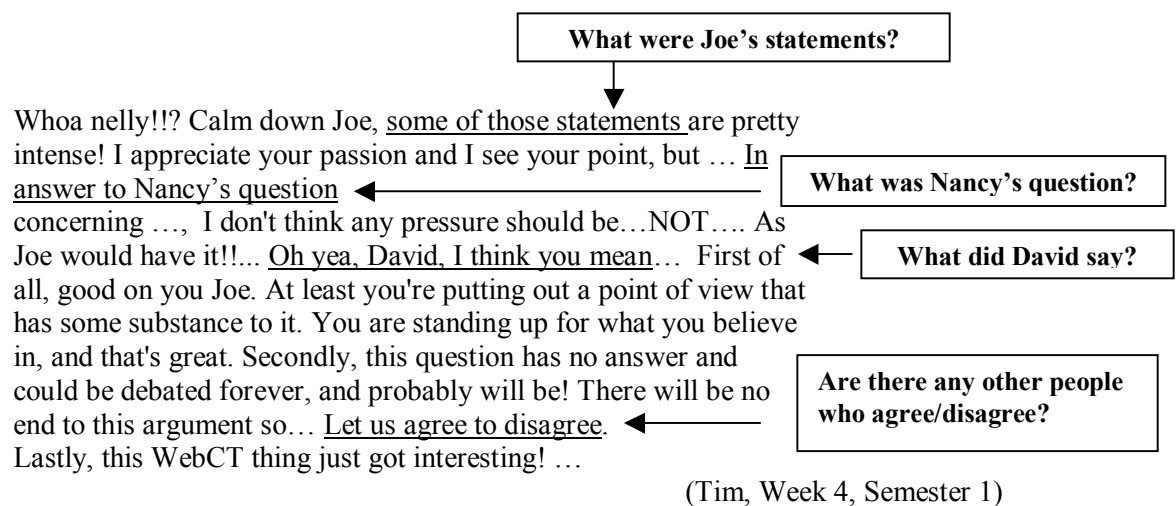


Figure 3. Tim's postings in relations to other students' postings

Out of this process of separating individual student's contributions from other student's contributions, I found that there was a need to look at the overall contributions to enable me to make sense of the meaning in individual postings. Any posting in an online discussion cannot be understood if it is treated as a stand-alone contribution. Working with the online transcripts made me realise that I could not separate individual postings inform their context. I regarded the first attempt of analysing the online discussion transcripts as a very useful indication of the importance of looking at individual postings within a context, not in isolation.

#### Online Discussion Transcripts: Looking as Whole

With the need to look again at the online transcripts, I found myself focusing on the individual student's overall contributions in the online discussions. The previous process of pulling out individual student's contributions had convinced me of a strong link between personal learning and social learning. In trying to look at the overall students' contributions I first tried to use existing frameworks to analyse the transcripts such as the Interaction Analysis Model (IAM) (Gunawardena et al, 1997) and Mason's (1991) model for analysing conference messages. The IAM identified five phases of data analysis processes:

Phase 1: Sharing and comparing of information: statement of observation or opinion: statement of agreement between participants.

Phase II: Discovery and exploration of dissonance and inconsistency among participants: identifying area of disagreement; asking and answering questions to clarify disagreement.

Phase III: Negotiation of meaning or knowledge co-construction: negotiating meaning of terms and negotiation of the relative weight to be used for various arguments.

Phase IV: Testing and modification: testing the proposed new knowledge against existing cognitive schema, personal experience and other sources.

Phase V: Phrasing of agreement and application of newly constructed meaning: summarizing agreement and metacognitive statements that show new knowledge construction (p. 414).

Mason's (1991) model for analysing conference messages proposed that research should focus on the educational value of the exchanges. These questions should be asked when the online discussion transcripts are analysed:

Do the participants build on previous messages?

Do they draw their own experience?

Do they refer to course material?

Do they refer to relevant material outside the course?

Do they initiate new ideas for discussion?

While both of the frameworks could be seen as having contributed to a certain degree of understanding in answering my research questions, I felt the urge to explore the online transcripts without engaging in particular analytical frameworks. My aim was to unfold the individual learning process from the online discussion and I first tried to find any patterns that emerged from the transcripts. At that point, I only focused on patterns that might emerge from the online discussion threads. This was a two stage task. During the first stage I looked for similarity in the patterns of participation in the online threads of a particular student, but within the context. This included the number of postings the students posted, when they posted them (earlier or later in the week) and whether they were stand-alone messages or were in response to other students' posts. The next stage involved looking at the content of the posts and the relationships between all the messages. This was a process of identifying similarities or differences (agreement or disagreement) between the messages. Following those two stages, I then returned to individual students postings in order to discover how they went about learning from the online discussions.

Online Discussion Transcripts: The Iteration between the Parts and Whole.

The relationship between individuals and the context they are operating in is therefore very important in this analysis. In other words, the context becomes the mould for individual approaches and actions which clarify the relationships between the context and the approaches and actions as Wertsch (1998) pointed out, "the relationships between human *action*, on the one hand and the cultural, institutional, and historical context in

which this actions occurs, on the other” (p.53). While looking again at the online transcripts, I found that it was hard to focus on one student without looking at another student or entire interactions. It was also hard to look at the entire interaction without wondering about the individual student’s intention or approach when posting a message. Equally it was difficult to look at a very interesting and active discussion without looking at how the thread started and developed and who had started the whole interaction or engagement. It was as if the whole was not complete without the parts and vice versa. The iteration process was the heart of the data analysis. From the iteration process, the analysis of the online transcripts and the online threads pointed to a variation in approaches to learning in the online discussion environment. This variation revealed itself in different patterns of participation and engagement. From the data, some students were consistent in their patterns of participation and there were also some students who altered their approaches in some discussions. The result of the analysis of the online discussions transcripts and threads will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

While looking at the online discussion transcripts, I also conducted the interviews for this study. The interview process in this study was a way of looking for causal relationships and furthering understanding of individual approaches towards learning in online discussions. To achieve this understanding, it was important to focus on individual perceptions and then triangulate the individual insights from the interviews with other data sources.



## *The Interview Transcripts*

### Looking at Parts

When I developed the first version of the interview questions, I did not yet realise that ideas would flow and evolve during **and/or** between the interviews. The notion of the parts and whole had emerged without my realising how important it would become in this study. The interview questions for the students (refer to Appendix C-1) consisted of five parts:

Part A: Personal – general questions

Part B: General understanding about learning

Part C: Online discussion in this course

Part D: Personal Learning – refer to contributions

Part E: Online learning

The interview questions for the tutor (refer to Appendix C-3) were also designed in parts so that specific issues could be addressed accordingly and in themes.

Part A: Personal – general questions

Part B: General understanding about teaching and learning

Part C: Online discussion in this course - moderator

Part D: Online discussion in this course - student

Part E: Online learning – students

Under each part of the interview questions for the students and the tutor, there were at least three questions that related to that part. The first round of interviews involved six students and a tutor. The interview tapes ranged from 40 minutes to one hour in length and all the interviews were conducted in different places such as in students' homes or in the discussion room at the university library. The tutor's interview was conducted in her office. The locations were selected by the participants to enable them to be comfortable with the interviews. Following each interview, I made my own observation notes in relation to the interview environment, my participant's attitude and particularly the difficulties I encountered during the interview. After transcribing each interview, I looked at the transcripts separately to understand each person's experience in the online discussions. This same procedure was completed for each interviewee data file. The data was set aside for a while until all the interviews were finished.

I found that looking at the interview transcripts was quite different from looking at the online discussion transcripts. Interviews could be analysed one by one to enable me to understand a person and individual preferences but the online discussion transcripts represented the interactions and the dynamic of social learning in which individuals and their context could not be separated from one another. After the first round of the interviews with six students and the tutor was complete, I returned to the interview transcripts with fresh interest and perspective. My first observation notes were put aside during the look-again process as I tried to look for individual patterns or repetition in the individual interview transcripts.

In order to explore the patterns emerging from the interview transcripts, I first looked at the transcripts individually, creating extensive notes and applying labels to indicate individual approaches. While each interview represented individual perspectives and responses, I felt the need to look at all the interviews in order to compare one interview to another, searching for themes and relationships between the students' responses, as well as the tutor's responses. But during the process of looking at the whole, I found that it was hard to focus on the whole context without looking at the interview transcripts one by one. I then realised that it was not looking at the whole or the parts that was important. It was looking at the two so that they could complement each other.

#### The Interview Transcripts: Looking as Whole and the Iteration Process

After looking at the interview transcripts one by one, I tried to identify relevant details and potential themes. Reviewing the interview transcripts involved an iterative process, from looking at the transcripts separately to trying to make connections between all the transcripts. The processes were reviewed in order to revise my analysis and themes with the possibility of gaining more information. The processes also involved collating responses to specific questions, bringing together all the answers from all the students to see the similarities or differences. I also tried to make connections between my interview questions and the patterns that I found in the analysis of individual student's perceptions of learning and knowledge. It is important to make a link between individual students' views in order to discover the way they go about learning in the online discussions.

Although the interviews and the online transcripts communicate the events that happened in the online discussions, I sensed the need to analyse the two in a context, making connections and comparisons in order to establish the relationships between students' voices and their actions. I preceded my analysis by looking at the interviews and the online transcripts as a whole and going back and forth between the two.

#### Triangulating the Transcripts with Journals - Going Back and Forth

The interviews and the online transcripts provided me with the evidence that the students' voices in the interviews reflected their actions in the online discussions. The students' voices offered me an insight into their key intentions when they logged into the online discussions. At the same time, the online discussion transcripts provided contribution of what the students said in the interviews. Looking at both in context followed the process of looking at the interviews and online transcripts separately. The iteration between the interviews and online transcripts was the main means of connecting individual approaches with the actual contributions of individual students in the online discussions. I went back to my interview transcripts and tried to work out why I had asked the questions that I asked in the interviews and what the relationship was between the interviews and the online transcripts. I then looked again at what my interview participants told me about their experience of learning and participating in the online discussions. I also tried to look back and forth between the online discussion transcripts and the interview transcripts in order to establish the pattern of participation in the online discussions. To establish the patterns of participation and engagement in the online discussions, the following two

questions became the main starting point for the overall analysis of the interview transcripts and the online discussion transcripts:

- i. What did the students tell me they did in the online discussions? (from the interviews)
- ii. What did they actually do in the online discussions? (from the online transcript)

Using these questions I tried to analyse whether there was any sequence or pattern that occurred during the interactions, and whether what the students actually did in the online discussions confirmed what they told me they did. The connection between the two questions would disentangle the individual learning approach in the online discussion. I needed to see how the two questions complemented one another in order to recognise the development of individual learning in online discussions.

Looking for consistencies between student interviews and online discussion transcripts provided a way of finding out whether students did actually do what they told me they did in the online discussions. As they became more experienced in using the tools, some of the students changed or altered their approaches towards learning in the online discussions but with similar types of engagements. It is interesting that sometimes the participants changed their approaches to participation in the online discussions as a result of the issues being discussed. More provocative issues sometimes invited more interactions and more contributions.

The overall process of analysing the data confirmed the importance of the relationship between personal and social learning. The process of looking at and analysing the data had manifested itself to be the crucial part of the iteration process, which underpins the concept of whole-and-parts in this study. The following sections provide the reflections on the data analysis involving the idea of personal learning and the critical link between personal and social learning. By reflecting on my journey of analysing the data, I hope to highlight in greater depth the nature of personal learning in the online environment, which is undeniably interwoven within social learning.

### *Reflections on the Journey of the Analysis*

My analysis suggested that students create their individual learning spaces within their contexts. Individuals are located in two main spaces: individual space and shared space. The relationships between the individual space and the shared space are important. Both spaces are not located separately in the context but rather are intersecting and connected. The individual space is the space where individual learning occurs and it is embedded within the social (shared) space. “Learning online provided the students with a means of comparing their progress with other students, and the use of computer conferencing set up an environment that required collaboration in order for the group to function effectively” (Stacey, 2005, p.34).

## The Idea of Individual Learning - the Critical Link between Personal and Social Learning

The journey in analysing the data in this study has opened up the critical link between personal and social learning. Whilst this study tried to discover the individual process of learning in online discussions, the discovery of the important relationships between personal and social learning brought to light that personal learning is located in the context the individuals are in. The process of individual learning does not occur in isolation, rather, it happens within a learning context that involves interaction with others. Individual learning has long been recognised by educational researchers and practitioners as a complex and “interactive activity” (Kolb, 1984, p.77). “The process of meaning-making and negotiation over meaning is always a practical matter for individuals in the sense that it is located in their social practices” (Scott & Usher, 1999, p.25).

Dysthe (2002) suggests that measuring the growth in understanding and conceptual changes in individual students as a result of an interaction is a very complex endeavour and each participant in an interaction will have a different learning experience. However, an individual does not experience learning in isolation from other individuals and different people play different roles in the social learning process. Stacey (2005) suggests that learning through collaboration in the online learning environment is one of “the attributes of the social construction of knowledge that emerged though collaborative learning” (p.312) by means of:

- i. the sharing of diverse perspectives of group members;
- ii. the clarification of ideas via group communication;

- iii. the feedback to a learner's ideas provided by other group members;
- iv. the process of seeking group solutions to problems;
- v. their practicing the new language of the knowledge community in discussion with other group members before using this language in the whole group or in the new knowledge community;
- vi. the power of the process of group discussions either by communications media or through face-to-face contact; and
- vii. the sharing of resources within the group.

As such, the collective ideas and information in an online environment provides opportunities for individual learning.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I have reflected on the data collection and analysis in this study. The analysis is based on, and reveals, the process of iteration between the whole and the parts. The concept of whole-and-parts is everywhere throughout this study. The opportunity to experience and understand the importance of how individuals and contexts are related and connected helped to increase my own understanding of what happened within a context.



In the next chapter I outline the findings of the above analysis and the stages of the findings, from levels of participation towards different types of engagement in the online discussion. The following chapter also represents another journey in understanding the connection between individual learning and social learning in relation to this study.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: TYPES OF INTERACTION IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS**

### **Introduction**

The word “participation” in relation to online discussions has always puzzled me. Does more participation in online discussions contribute to individual learning, or if learning requires more than just participation, what is the difference between participating and engaging in learning? Throughout the data analysis process described in Chapter Four, I kept looking at the meaning of participation and engagement in online discussions and the relationship between the two. Finally, I looked at participation and engagement as separate units of analysis, regarding the two as different constructs and then trying to draw connections between them.

The findings from this study found that there are four types of participants’ approaches in terms of their engagement and level of visibility in online discussions, which are lurker, bully, regular participant and non-engaged. The four types of participants’ approaches show different levels of engagement towards learning. The findings also indicate that there are different levels of visibility - less visible, visible and highly visible. People who are less visible participate less in the online discussions and people who are highly visible participate more in the online discussions. For example a lurker is considered highly engaged towards learning but less visible in terms of their participation in online discussions.

The four types of participants' approaches led to the development of the *Types of Online Interaction Model*. The *Types of Online Interaction Model* is a framework that has been developed to propose the roles that people adopt in the online discussions environment. The model shows four types of interaction found in this study and also suggests five other types of interaction to illustrate the roles that people might possibly adopt within the online discussions environment. The model also highlights that different roles represent different levels of engagement and visibility. Through the model, I also suggest that individual adopt certain roles when they are first involved in online discussions. However, it is possible for individuals to move from one role to another with the necessary motivation and strategies towards learning. The model also points out that motivation is the first step that an individual needs in order to move from less engaged to engaged in learning. With motivation an individual is likely to move from engaged towards highly engaged in learning by using personal develop strategies that enable her or him to gain more from the online discussions.

This model has evolved from a number of attempts at analysing the data by looking at it separately, collectively and iterating between the parts and the whole. It was apparent from the tutor's interview that the tutor had not considered the relationships between participating in online discussions and the "learning" that took place when adopting the instructional method in the course.

I haven't really thought that they learn from WebCT ... I have to tell you, I know its sounds stupid but I kind of thought it was just like a gimmick at first and so the learning part of it has been a bonus ... a bit of a surprise. (Beatrice, Tutor's interview, 20/08/04).

However, the findings from this study suggest that there are integrated relationships between participating in online discussions and engagement in learning. The findings also suggest that participating in online discussions does not necessarily indicate engagement in learning.

### **Types of Interaction**

The types of interaction found in this study are based on the levels of participation in relation to the levels of engagement in learning. The relationships between the two levels of participation and engagement resulted in the findings of four types of interaction in this study. The four types of interaction revealed a variation of individual approaches in learning in online discussions.

### *Levels of Participation*

Participation in online discussions in this study refers to the number of posts contributed by a student to the weekly topics. Although they were only required to post at least once per topic, it was important to see whether the participants contributed only the required

posts or whether there was any indication that they were contributing more or less than the required posts.

In trying to understand participation in the online discussions, I first looked at the weekly threads. The weekly threads provided clear and straightforward evidence of the quantity of individual students' postings each week. Table 4 indicates participants' patterns of participation and the number of postings for individual students in the online discussions in this course for semester one. It is interesting to note that although students are given marks for posting one contribution each week, there are differences in the levels of participation between individuals.

**Table 4: Individual patterns of participation and number of postings for ten weeks.**

| <b>Week</b>    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Total<br>Posted<br>Posts | Patterns of<br>participation |
|----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Student</b> |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |                          |                              |
| Hannah         | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1  | 11                       | Moderate                     |
| Tim            | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 6 | 1 | 1  | 18                       | Active                       |
| Zoe            | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1  | 9                        | Moderate                     |
| Cindy          | 1 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0  | 7                        | Non-active                   |
| Tanesha        | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1  | 8                        | Moderate                     |
| Robin          | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1  | 11                       | Moderate                     |
| Logan          |   |   |   |   | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0  | 9                        | Moderate                     |
|                | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |   |   |   |   |   |    |                          |                              |
| Jenny          | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1  | 7                        | Non-active                   |
|                |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |                          |                              |
| Lisa           | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1  | 10                       | Moderate                     |
|                |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |                          |                              |
| Mary           | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0  | 9                        | Moderate                     |
|                |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |                          |                              |
| Karen          | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1  | 6                        | Non-active                   |
|                |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |                          |                              |
| Olivia         | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0  | 6                        | Non active                   |
|                |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |                          |                              |

Three categories of participation were identified in the online discussions for this course. These three categories varied in terms of the levels of participation of students in the online discussions. The categories were: (a) non-active participants, (b) moderate participants, and (c) active participants. The three categories of participation are represented in Figure 4.

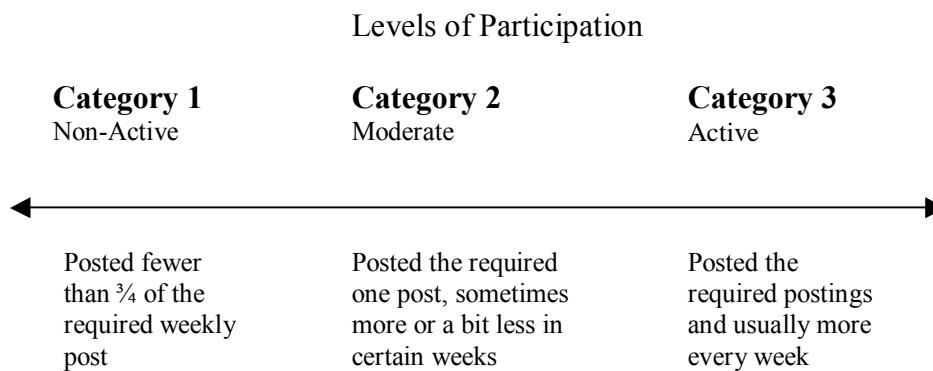


Figure 4. Levels of overall participation in the online discussion

I developed this categorisation from looking at the requirement of postings in the online discussions. Students were required to post a minimum of one post a week for ten weeks. Students are considered as non-active participants (Category One) when they posted fewer than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the required once a week posts. Students in this category did not participate reasonably in the online discussions even in light of the marks to be gained from posting one message. The interviews revealed that there were several reasons for this lack of participation: it was time consuming, there were too many topics to cope with

and the marks given were not worth the effort to get involved in the discussions. One of the students indicated that the number of topics in the online discussions did not give the opportunity to address the topics in depth with,

To be honest, I have been slightly disappointed in [the course] ... like a lot of other people have said, in some parts it was kinda hard to keep up with what was going on and the huge amount that we covered didn't really give us a chance to really get into something (Karen, Course Summary, Semester One)!

Although one of the students (Cindy) participated more than once in week four, I considered her to be a non-active participant in terms of her lack of contribution in other weeks. It is interesting to see that some students did contribute more in certain weeks but did not bother to post in other weeks. The variation in Cindy's contributions raised a question of why she contributed more in certain weeks and did not contribute at all in other weeks.

**Table 5: Variation in Cindy's contributions in the online discussions.**

| <b>Week</b>  | 1 | 2 | 3 | <b>4</b> | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Total Posted Messages | Patterns of participation |
|--------------|---|---|---|----------|---|---|---|---|---|----|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>Cindy</b> | 0 | 1 | 0 | <b>4</b> | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0  | 7                     | Non-active                |



In Category Two (moderate participation), students posted more or less the required postings for most of the ten weeks. Students in this category could be encouraged to participate more in the discussions by being provoked or if the issues discussed were of interest to them. Moderate participants were students who regularly logged into the online discussions and they were always there. Some of the moderate participants were enticed to participate by the 5% marks they would gain when they posted the required number of messages in the online discussions as indicated by these statements,

I'm a little unsure what question I'm supposed to be answering here, but I've decided to post this to get my marks (Tanesha, week 1, semester 2).

When I contributed once a week, I'll get the 5% (Zoe, Interview 1, 30/07/04).

There were also students who felt that having to post once a week for different topics was time consuming. This resulted in moderate participants not being active or encouraged to contribute more than they were required to. They suggested that fewer topics might encourage them to contribute more as they would be able to be more focused on fewer issues. When they were asked in the interviews about why they directly answered the tutor's questions rather than actively discussing the topics, the participants echoed each other by responding that it was time consuming.

I think it was because of time constraints, actually. Having to post a message once a week was hard enough... Two or more weekly will be quite difficult for me. I just can't do it; I have other courses to concentrate on (Hannah, Interview 1, 03/08/04).

I hate to say this, but there were too many questions to... answer in the discussion, really. I'd like it if ... there were fewer questions so that we could really go more depth into the topics discussed. That would give us more time to think. A topic to discuss every week was too much (Zoe, Interview 1, 30/07/04).

In Category Three (active participation), students posted more than once most of the weeks in the semester. The students were actively discussing the topics for most of the weeks. My analysis suggests that students in this category sometimes provoked other students to join the discussions.

The discussion itself invited me to talk more and more ... certainly when there was a really hot issue. I think sometimes people were not really honest about what they really think about something... or they may be just don't care ... I like to probe people to talk more (Tim, Interview 1, 28/07/04).

Students in this category showed consistently higher levels of participation throughout the semesters and also provided evidence of participating in discussions other than those related to the topics posted by the moderator (e.g., participating in the lounge discussions). For example, Tim was actively involved in the lounge discussion area regarding an issue related to a lecture conducted by an overseas lecturer. In the overall thread for the discussion, Tim contributed nine messages out of the total of 21 posted messages as shown in Figure 5 where I have use alphabetic codes for students who are not involved in this study.

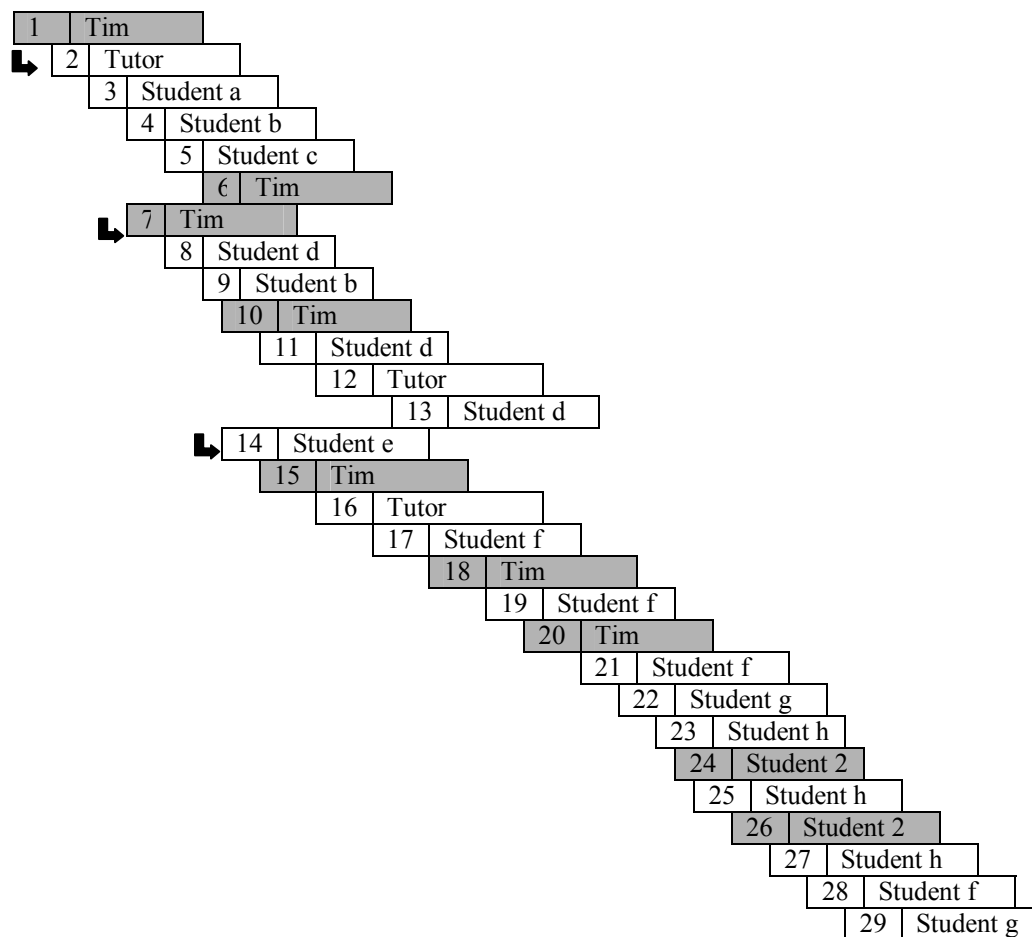


Figure 5. Tim's contributions to one thread in the lounge discussion area in semester two

The findings reveal that participation in online discussions does not necessarily indicate individuals' engagement in learning. Active participants indicated individual engagement in the discussion, but not necessarily engagement in learning.

While the analysis of the students' participation revealed the different levels of participation in the online discussions, there was no evidence of the learning process through participation in the online learning environment. My early analysis did point to a variation in students' participation in the online discussions in the course. However, one of my major realisations was the fact that this variation does not reveal the patterns of engagement in learning in the online discussions. I have found that visibly active participants do not necessarily demonstrate engagement in learning, or vice versa. Visible in this sense refers to contributing and actively posting messages, which could be seen in the online discussion threads. Learning is more than just participating visibly in online discussions. To understand more clearly how individual students learn from online discussions, their engagement needed to be viewed in different ways. Different patterns of engagement would highlight different types of participation and reveal whether or not the participation led to personal learning.

### *Levels of Engagement*

Engagement in this study refers to the engagement towards learning from the online discussions. Engagement also refers to learning that is generated through participating

and exploring online discussions as a tool of learning. By engaging in the online discussions, students were also engaged in trying to find a way of establishing individual roles in learning from online discussions. Engaging in online discussion offers students a chance to make decisions about their own learning by using an individual approach and discovering their own roles within the online discussion context.

There were three levels of engagement identified in this study. The levels were less engaged, engaged and highly engaged towards learning in the online discussions. The relationship between how the participants engaged towards learning and their levels of participation in the online discussions resulted in four different types of interaction that I identified at an early stage of this analysis.

#### *Four Types of Interaction*

There are four types of interactions identified early in this study: (a) lurker, (b) bully, (c) follower, and (d) non-engaged. From the analysis, I found there were engaged and non-engaged students in the online discussions. Students who were engaged in the online discussions engaged in different ways according to their preferences and personal intentions and or approaches. The four types of interactions are shown in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Four types of interaction

| Week           | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4       | Week 5 | Week 6 | Week 7 | Week 8  | Week 9 | Week 10 | Total posted messages | Types of Interaction |
|----------------|--------|--------|--------|--------------|--------|--------|--------|---------|--------|---------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| <b>Student</b> |        |        |        |              |        |        |        |         |        |         |                       |                      |
| Hannah         | 22     | 23     | 16     | 40           | 25     | 24     | 18     | 13,20   | 17     | 15      | 11                    | Lurker               |
| Tim            | 1      | 3,26   | 2      | 2,9          | 7      | 1      | 2,12   | 1,4,6,1 | 2      | 3       | 18                    | Bully                |
|                |        |        |        |              |        |        |        | 1,17,19 |        |         |                       |                      |
| Zoe            | 20     | 9      | 7      | 31           | 13     | 12     | 18     | 9       |        | 6       | 9                     | Regular Participant  |
| Cindy          | -      | 8      | -      | 20,22, 24,30 | 17     | 7      | -      | -       | -      | -       | 7                     | Non-Engaged          |
| Tanesha        | 6      | 1      | 3      | 19           | 16     | -      | 15     | -       | -      | -       | 6                     | Non-engaged          |
| Robin          | 2      | 10     | 1      | 6,12,1       | 11     | 6      | 20     | -       | 11     | 1       | 12                    | Regular Participant  |
|                |        |        |        | 8            |        |        |        |         |        |         |                       |                      |
| Logan          | 7      | 5      | 9      | 32           | 15     | 4      | 4      | 2       | 1      | 9       | 10                    | Regular Participant  |
| Jenny          | 23     | 10     | -      | -            | 24     | 15     | 11     | -       | 1      | -       | 6                     | Regular Participant  |
| Lisa           | 19     | 12     | 13     | 37           | 37     | 14     | 13     | 22      | 13     | 12      | 10                    | Lurker               |

|                 |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |             |
|-----------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-------------|
| Mary            | 18 | 17 | 15 | 34 | 22 | 21 | 15 | 21 | 8  | 14 | 10 | Lurker      |
| Karen           | 14 | 11 | -  | -  | 19 | 10 | 20 | -  | 14 | -  | 6  | Non-engaged |
| Olivia          | 13 | 4  | 4  | 27 | 4  | 8  | -  | -  | 1  | 2  | 7  | Non-engaged |
| <b>Total</b>    | 22 | 27 | 16 | 40 | 25 | 24 | 21 | 27 | 17 | 16 | -  | -           |
| <b>Messages</b> |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |             |

## Lurkers

Students who were labelled as lurkers rarely took part visibly in the online discussions. They were always late contributors in the online discussions and usually posted their messages from the middle to the end of the weekly thread. Although they are difficult to identify, lurkers could be characterized by their actions in the online discussions, such as referring to other people's posts when they posted their messages. Interviews and one student's learning journal also revealed that some students were comfortable being lurkers because that was the space of learning for them. The space of learning is a place where the students pondered over the topics discussed and evaluated their own thinking before they contributed to the online discussions. Students who were lurkers did not actively participate in the online discussions and contributed only when they thought necessary to and or when they felt they were ready to contribute to an established discussion.

Participants in this category mainly learned from reading other peoples' posts in the online discussions. They posted the minimum contribution in the online discussions and were always there hiding behind closed doors. Participants in this category were usually involved in regular recurring patterns of interactions. The patterns involved being invisible for some of the time and being visible when they were ready to contribute to the discussions. Invisible is used to indicate that lurkers in this study always took their time in the early part of the weekly discussions to read other peoples' posts and therefore they were not there visibly in the discussions. For them, lurking served two main purposes -



preparation for the discussions and constructing individual knowledge from other peoples' ideas.

It was also apparent in the interviews that participants in this category needed the time to ponder the topics and critically evaluate other people's posts before contributing their own ideas in the online discussions with,

I have read some of other students' posts. Some of their ideas make sense and most of them were saying something quite similar to each other. What I am going to do now is. I need to understand what other people were saying, try to relate my own opinion with others and see how my ideas fit to others (Hannah, Personal Learning Journal, week 1).

I feel that it (online discussion) makes me spend more time trying to figure out a question, so that I will be able to contribute my bit in the discussions... I always do my research and go deeply into a topic before I posted any message... I need to put all other people's ideas side by side... learn from the different ideas they have, and make a decision based on the comparisons of ideas... Which ones are the best and why (Hannah, Interview 1, 4/08/04).

Fraze's (2003) study found that several students were participating in a more passive manner (i.e., mostly browsing rather than posting). This could indicate that the act of lurking also occurred in her study. Participants who were in this category were comfortable being invisible most of the time throughout the whole discussion. They contributed only when they were ready to be involved in the discussions. The lurking process was necessary for them in order to be in a good position in the discussions.

## Bullies

Students in this category were active participants and engaged very quickly in the online discussions. They were eager to contribute, energetic and sometimes used different strategies to provoke other people to be involved in the online discussions. Students in this category were being labeled as bullies because of their aggressiveness towards other students during the discussions. They sometimes used annoying words and inappropriate personal insults that irritated other students as indicated by this comment about them:

I think I need to have clear strategies to deal with bullies. It's been a problem every year but particularly a problem this year... and I need to think of how to deal with these people creatively because they have the right to be in there too but they don't have the right to bully others. ... I think that's what WebCT does, it shows their learning a lot more, specifically instances... I can think of... perhaps when people starting responding to bullies... they actually said... 'hey, maybe you are wrong' (Beatrice, Tutor's Interview, 27/08/04)!

Although they were labeled as bullies in the online discussions, participants in this category were also responsible for initiating discussions. They always tried to move the discussions from just a question and answer session to something more vibrant and active. In addition to their role as discussion starters, there were times when they followed the discussions intensely before contributing their ideas. In order to stimulate the discussions, they sometimes encouraged and provoked others to participate in the discussions questioning other students' ideas, trying to rationalize and give reasons for their ideas during the discussions. Participants in this category sometimes posted

provocative questions or comments, which initiated responses from other students. They sometimes led to transitions into new discussion topics as seen by Tim's comments:

Sometimes the discussion was 'irresistible'... to not being involved with. People were sometimes very passionate about certain topics and it was good to just argue and see what comes out after (laugh). But... it was really something to do with the issues ... and sometimes there was nothing to discuss ... really, and sometimes there were 'hot' issues and arguments going on... which was good. (Tim, Interview 2, 12/11/04).

Although only one of the participants in this study could be included in this category, my overall analysis found that there were other students who adopted the same strategy in the online discussions in this course with Tim's statement of,

I think perhaps that I have a tendency to take advantage of the informal nature of the online discussion, but I would hate to see the online discussion format change (Tim, Personal Learning Journal, Week 5).

### Regular Participants

Students who were engaged as regular participants were mainly involved in online discussions just to fulfil the course requirements. They could be considered to be moderate participants who contributed to the online discussions to get the 5% marks for the course, or who did not contribute because of the small percentage of the assessment.

Students in this category were sometimes quite passive participants who contributed to the online discussions only in response to the weekly questions. However, they were also sometimes active participants as they would get involved more if provoked. For example, one of the participants (Robin) contributed one post every week overall, but posted four posts in week 4 of semester 1. The discussion topic in week 4 interested many students and Robin was also motivated to contribute her opinion (please refer to Table 7 on p.117)

#### Non-Engaged students

There were also students who were not engaged in the online discussions. These students could be categorised as non-engaged students who did not bother to post even for the sake of assessment. They appeared to participate in online discussions without any specific learning strategies. While there was probably still learning occurring in this category, there was no evidence of the non-engaged students' contributions to the discussions that generated responses from others. However, it was possible for participants in this category to follow a discussion simultaneously when being provoked or stimulated by others. For example, Cindy was one of the students who was categorised as a non-engaged student. But in week 4, semester 1, she contributed four times because a student had posted an answer that annoyed her. She responded to the student's posts and contributed her opinion on the topic. On the other hand, Cindy did not post any messages in weeks 1, 3, 7, 8, 9 or 10. Table 7 indicates the thread for week 4 in the semester 1 course. The thread started earlier in week 4 and Cindy's first message was the 24<sup>th</sup> post for that particular week.

**Table 7: Cindy's postings for week 4**

|                    |                          |              |                                |
|--------------------|--------------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|
| Post No. 22        | Week 4: Migration        | Robin        | March, 29 2004, 3.21pm         |
| Post No. 23        | Week 4: Migration        | Student n    | March,30 2004, 10.35 am        |
| <b>Post No. 24</b> | <b>Week 4: Migration</b> | <b>Cindy</b> | <b>March, 30 2004, 12.07pm</b> |
| Post No. 25        | Week 4: Migration        | Student k    | March, 30 2004, 12.51pm        |
| <b>Post No. 26</b> | <b>Week 4: Migration</b> | <b>Cindy</b> | <b>March, 31 2004, 9.49am</b>  |
| Post No. 27        | Week 4: Migration        | Student k    | March, 31 2004 12.27pm         |
| <b>Post No. 28</b> | <b>Week 4: Migration</b> | <b>Cindy</b> | <b>March 30, 2004, 12.17pm</b> |
| Post No. 29        | Week 4: Migration        | Tutor        | March 30, 2004, 12.26pm        |
| Post No. 30        | Week 4: Migration        | Student p    | March 30, 2004 3.32pm          |
| Post No. 31        | Week 4: Migration        | Student q    | March, 30 2004, 4.24pm         |
| Post No. 32        | Week 4: Migration        | Student r    | March 30, 2004, 6.26pm         |
| Post No. 33        | Week 4: Migration        | Student k    | April 1, 2004, 10.36pm         |
| <b>Post No. 34</b> | <b>Week 4: Migration</b> | <b>Cindy</b> | <b>April 1, 2004 11.08am</b>   |
| Post No. 35        | Week 4: Migration        | Student s    | April 1, 2004, 3.31pm          |
| Post No. 36        | Week 4: Migration        | Student u    | April 5, 2004, 3.11pm          |
| Post No. 37        | Week 4: Migration        | Tanesha      | April 6, 2004, 4.04pm          |

\*Thread for week 4 starts from Post No. 1

In Table 7 the messages are not in the order of posting but rather in the order of the thread. What is important to highlight is the fact that although Cindy posted four messages in week 4, two of the messages were posted on the same day, one after the other (message 26 and 29). However, she logged in again the day after to respond to student k's messages. Her last message for week 4 was also in response to student k's message (message 34). This suggests that although I have categorised Cindy as a non-engaged participant in the online discussions, she could be persuaded or provoked into being involved actively when there were issues that interested her.

The four types of interaction found in this study differ in terms of their level of engagement towards learning and level of visibility in the online discussions. Lurkers and bullies were seen as more engaged towards learning than the regular participants or non-engaged students in this study. However, in terms of visible participation, bullies could be seen as willing to participate actively in the online discussions for several reasons. For the bully, the reason for being involved in energetic discussion could be related to the learning that they gained from it. Regular participants in this study participated and engaged moderately in the online discussions. For the regular participants, contributing to online discussions was viewed as necessary for getting the marks they needed for the course. The non-engaged students were neither active in participating nor actively engaged in online discussions. It is interesting to note

that although lurkers, regular participants and non-engaged participants differ in their approaches, they evidently participated and contributed more when there were hot issues under discussion.

### *Moving from One Type of Interaction to Another*

The above findings suggest that there were four types of interaction in these online discussions: lurkers, bullies, regular participants, and non-engaged participants. The four types of interaction varied in terms of the students' learning approaches in the online discussions. However, although the participants in this study could be classified into the above-mentioned categories, it is important to highlight that they sometimes altered their approaches, especially the students who were lurkers and regular participants. Drawing on evidence in my data, I suggest that underpinning the changes in individual approach are the roles that people play in the online discussions and also the tutor's approach in designing the activity. In these circumstances, bullies played the most important roles of inviting and encouraging individuals who then adopt other types of interaction to be more active participants in the discussions. Although informal, the act of provoking using words and questions certainly resulted in more vibrant and energetic discussions.

Students who were engaged as regular participants and lurkers were always there in the online discussions, although regular participants might have appeared more visible than lurkers. However, when they were present, they were certainly monitoring (consciously or unconsciously) the activities that occurred in the discussions. When the bully initiated

provoking and sometimes annoying questions or arguments, regular participants and lurkers were tempted to be involved, providing their own opinions and tendering their own arguments on the issues discussed. This led to more active and lively discussions for certain weeks in the course. Even non-engaged students were sometimes encouraged to be involved in the discussions when provoked by the bully.

Herrington, Oliver and Reeves (2003) found two patterns of engagement in the authentic online learning environment that they studied. The first pattern which they called “willing acceptance and relief” is related to students who instantly engage, willingly and readily, in the learning context. The second pattern which is “delayed engagement” relates to students who “didn't take it easily when accepting the new teaching mode” (p.15). The two types of engagement found in Herrington, Oliver and Reeves relate to my study in terms of how willing students are to engage in the online discussions. Bullies and possibly lurkers could be classified in the first type of engagement of “willing acceptance and “relief.” Although bullies and lurkers could be seen in a similar category of engagement, their approaches in participating in the online discussions are different. Regular participants and non-engaged participants could be seen in the “delayed engagement” type. However, regular participants would be more likely to be engaged earlier than the non-engaged students. Although regular participants participated more in the online discussions, their level of engagement depended on encouragement and individual efforts to engage them.



Although participants could be classified in these specific categories of engagement, they sometimes changed their approaches of participating in the online discussions. One of the reasons for this was that some of the students were encouraged to participate as a result of the issues being discussed. Individual students were found to be changing their regular approaches in online discussions when there was sufficient stimulation and motivation for them to be involved. The movement from one type of interaction to another was apparent in individual actions such as moving from less visible participation towards visible participation for a certain period of time when there were hot issues being discussed. Being provoked or persuaded by other individuals also resulted in individuals changing their approaches in the online discussions.

#### Types of Interaction as Exhibited by Hot Issues

Some issues invited more interaction and more contributions that led to more engagement in the discussions. Issues became hot when participants became engaged in heated conversation. The roles played by individuals involved in the online discussions were important in shaping how discussions developed and evolved. Bullies played an important role in inviting and initiating a topic. Although bullies sometimes went beyond the limit in using inappropriate words in communicating their ideas, their roles in the online discussions should not be viewed as unimportant. For example, a lurker could be woken-up from their lurking and reading activities when there were interesting issues raised by the bullies in the discussions. This indicates that lurkers were always there, but took their time to respond unless there was sufficient stimulation and motivation to enter the discussion immediately.

Although these findings suggest negative labels (bully and lurker) for some individuals, there are positive aspects to these labels. The positive impact of these approaches on learning for the individuals and for the group needs to be considered in more detail.

#### Toward a More Positive Understanding of Types of Interaction

From the above findings, it seems that each of the four types of interaction found in this study is negatively labelled. While the negative labelling seems to dominate the individual approach, there are positive outcomes from the approaches, which point toward the importance of the individual approaches in online discussions. The roles of individuals in the online discussions could be viewed as an important factor in enhancing engagement. Considering the roles that individuals adopted in the online discussions, I tried to balance the so-called negative approach and the positive outcomes that lead to more interaction. I am looking for positive ways to describe the patterns of individual contributions to the online discussions. The exploration of the individual approaches led to Figure 6 below.

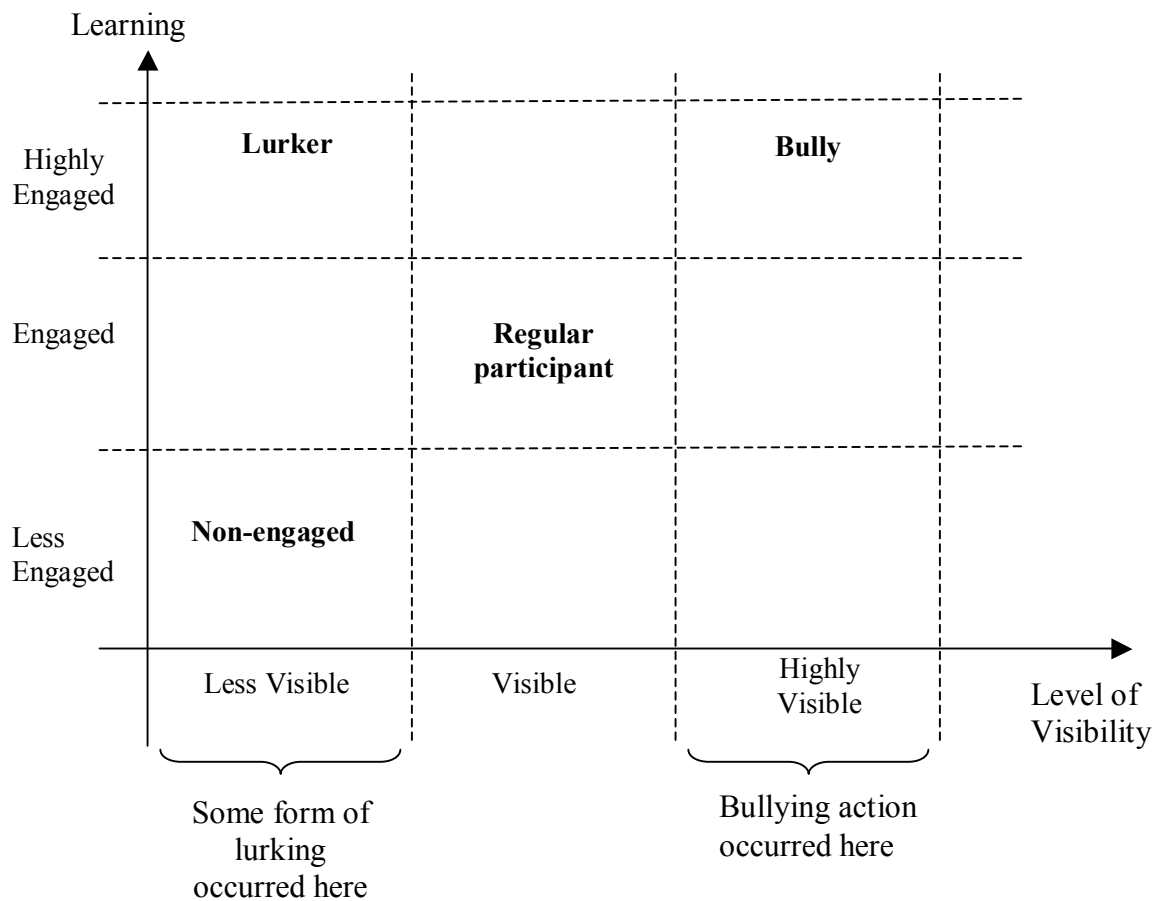


Figure 6. Participants' approaches in terms of their engagement and level of visibility in online discussions.

In Figure 6 the four types of interaction found in this study are located within the engagement towards learning and the level of visibility. The learning axis refers to the level of engagement in the online discussions, which indicates an individual's approach towards learning in online discussions. Level of visibility indicates an individual's approach to participation in online discussions, from less visible towards highly visible.

Students who were less visible contributed less in the online discussions and students who were highly visible contributed actively.

The findings shown in Figure 6 make it possible to shift the focus from negative labeling towards a consideration of how the roles of individuals informed the types of interaction in the online discussions. In looking again at the terms used to describe the four types of interaction found in this study, I looked at both the level of engagement and visibility of the participants. Participants who are considered as lurkers and non-engaged are located within the less visible position in terms of their levels of participation. However, the lurking process varied depending on individual approaches.

Although a bully can be considered highly visible and highly engaged in the online discussions, the term bully itself could represent a negative individual action. The bullying actions occurred within the highly visible area in Figure 6. However, as with the lurking actions, the level of engagement towards learning also varied from one individual to another. Because of the variation in the individual approaches, labeling the bullying action only negatively might have resulted merely in a passive online discussion session based around questions and answers. Because the bullying action involved provoking others to stimulate discussion, I began to think of the bully as one who provoked conversation and therefore changed the term *bully* to *provocateur*. The specific reasons why I made this change will be discussed further in Chapter Six.

Participants who were highly engaged in learning but less visible in the online discussions learned from reading and analyzing other people's contributions. Hence, it is inappropriate to give them the negative label of lurkers. In this study, although they contributed late in the discussions, some of their contributions could be seen as the learning they gained from reading other people's posts. In addition, the levels of engagement of those who had been labeled as lurkers might be different. I therefore dropped the labels of *lurker* and non-engaged and moved toward using three categorisations that show different levels of engagement towards learning. By shifting the way in which I perceived these participants, I opened up the possibility of recognising an important type of interaction – that of the *eventual participant*. The eventual participant was found to be highly engaged in learning with less visibility in participation. In Chapter Six, I will further describe how an eventual participant saw how her approach contributed to her personal learning.

The regular participants in this study showed flexibility and the ability to move from being a moderate participant towards either a non-active or a more active participant in the online discussions. The regular participant's approach taken by individuals varied among them and depended on how they were influenced by the interactions within the online discussion context. In order to highlight this flexibility, I changed the term regular participant to *flexible learner* to signal more clearly the possibility of moving between different levels of engagement and levels of visibility. The flexible learner could move towards a higher or lower level of engagement and towards a higher or lower level of visibility in the online discussion.

Non-engaged participants appear less engaged in learning because they are less visible in online discussion. Looking at the approach of non-engaged participants in the online discussions, it is incorrect to assume that non-engaged participants are not interested or have no intention of learning. Instead, non-engaged participants might have had problems with the content of the course or in adapting to the technology. This may hinder them from visibly participating and engaging in learning. They also might not have the motivation needed to be involved in the online discussions. The difficulties that might be faced by these non-engaged participants became the turning point for me to view them as *peripheral participants*. A peripheral participant might need more encouragement or facilitation to be able to move towards more visibility and engagement in learning. The movement from negative labeling towards recognizing the roles assumed by individuals in the online discussions resulted in the types of interaction showed in Figure 7 below.

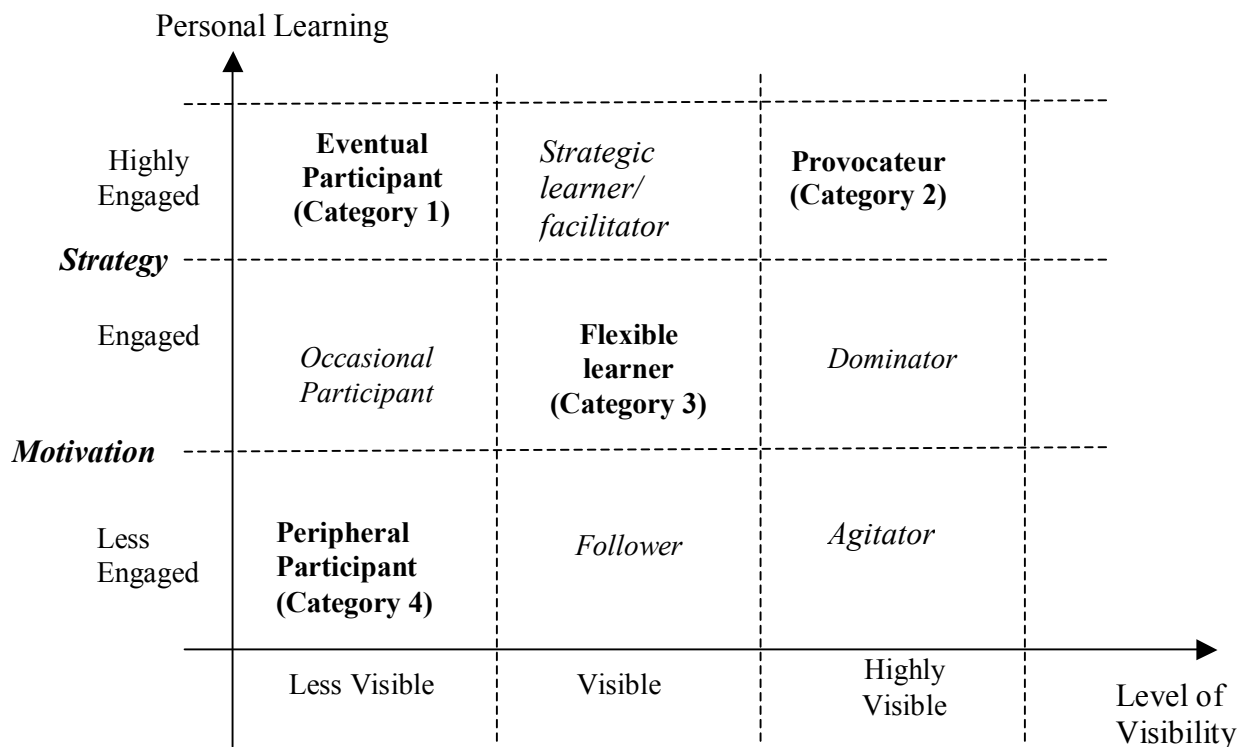


Figure 7. Types of Interaction Models

In Figure 7 the types of interaction shown in bold indicate the findings of this study, whilst types of interaction in italics indicate other possible types of interaction in the online discussion context. These categories were identified in discussions about my emerging findings: colleagues who were able to recall their experiences of teaching online shared in the development of these ideas.

There are also two horizontal lines that divide the engagement levels (less engaged, engaged and highly engaged) in Figure 7. These indicate motivation and strategy as two

factors that have an effect on the individual's level of engagement. Motivation is important in order for individuals to move from the less engaged level towards the engaged level. Such motivation may include intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, for example, increased confidence in using technology or the internet (intrinsic motivation) or encouragement or facilitation from peers or moderators (extrinsic motivation).

Another possible factor that may encourage movement from the engaged towards the highly engaged level in online discussions is strategy. Individual strategies such as reading other peoples' posts before contributing individual posts and provoking the involvement of others could be contributors to the highly engaged levels.

### **Other Possible Types of Interaction**

In addition to the four types of interaction found in this study, I have also suggested another five types of interaction that might occur in online discussions. The five suggested types are: *strategic learner/facilitator, occasional participant, dominator, struggler and agitator*.

#### *Strategic Learner/Facilitator*

A strategic facilitator or learner is highly engaged towards learning and visibly participates in online discussions. Although the role is not highly visible, we could consider the role as the most important type of interaction within the online discussion



context. A strategic facilitator/learner observes and tries different strategies in order to invite participation and engagement. As such, a strategic facilitator is responsible for recognising the existence of other types of interactions in online discussions. When acting in this way, a person tries to motivate individuals in the context to move from a less engaged position towards a higher engagement in learning. A strategic learner plays an important role in his/her own and others' learning by adopting different strategies that benefit themselves and others. Individuals such as the provocateur with high visibility and a higher level of engagement in learning would be encouraged strategically by the strategic facilitator to back off to provide an opportunity for other participants to contribute and engaged more fully. It is also possible for the strategic facilitator to encourage provocateurs to facilitate others in the discussions to avoid them being labelled as bullies.

### *Occasional Participant*

An occasional participant is a less visible participant with moderate engagement towards learning in online discussions. An occasional participant might be reading other people's posts during the process but also might have problems understanding or keeping track of the discussions, thus hindering their engagement in learning.

### *Dominator*

A dominator is a highly visible participant with a moderate engagement in online discussions. This type of interaction exists in the online discussion context when a person

participates at a high level without analysing the content of the messages before posting.

A dominator repetitively misses the point of the discussions and they are channels for portraying him/herself as a dominating person but with actual moderate engagement towards learning.

### *Follower*

A follower is a visible participant but less focused on learning in online discussions. A follower could be seen as a person who is moderately capable of using the online discussion technology but lacks sources or information in relation to the course content. Without the necessary motivation, a follower would be less motivated to be engaged in learning and contributing in the online discussions just to meet the requirement of the course.

### *Agitator*

An agitator is a highly visible participant in online discussions but with low engagement towards learning. The agitator attempts to capture the attention of others with less motivation towards learning and the content of the course. The agitator posts messages to stir up the discussion but the content of their postings is irrelevant to the topic discussed.

## **Summary**

The four types of interaction found in this study and the five suggested types of interaction illustrate the roles adopted during participation in an online discussion environment. The roles differ with each person and it is possible for individuals to move from one position to another with the necessary motivation and strategies towards learning. Indeed, this thesis suggests that the ability to move between these various positions is a skill that, if fostered among course participants, could enhance the quality of online discussion and the potential for students who are currently not skilled in learning online to learn more easily in this medium. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts in that by actively supporting the learning of the group as a whole, each individual learns. By being able to take on different roles, individuals develop the skill of fostering conversations that enable learning.

In this chapter I have outlined the overall findings in this study. The findings suggest four types of interaction in the online discussions in the course studied. From the four types of interaction, two participants demonstrated two different ways of engaging towards their individual learning in the online discussions. Through these participants, the roles of an eventual participant and a provocateur are discussed further in Chapter Six.

## **CHAPTER SIX: EVENTUAL PARTICIPANTS AND PROVOCATEURS**

### **Introduction**

In Chapter Five, I discussed the overall findings for this study. The initial findings revealed four types of interaction in the online discussions in this course. I labelled the students involved in these interactions as lurkers, bullies, regular participants and non-engaged participants. I also wrote about shifting from labelling people as a result of their individual actions towards acknowledging the roles they adopted in online discussions. Hannah, who was labelled as a lurker, moved towards an eventual participant, while Tim, who was labelled as a bully, became recognised as a provocateur in this study. Consistent with the findings, I also suggested five other possible roles of individuals engaged in online discussion and highlighted the possibilities of moving from one role to another depending on the effects of motivation and strategies on individual engagement levels.

Two contrasting ways of seeing how individuals develop their roles in online discussions are by looking at the action taken by individuals and how they perceive they learn from online discussion. As such, it is important to look thoroughly at individual approaches and how the actions of individuals reveal their adopted roles. In this study, Hannah and Tim revealed a high level of engagement in the online discussions but with different levels of visibility. Both participants' actions (when they were labelled as lurker and bully) were considered to be negative actions in online discussion. However, both participants regarded their actions as contributing to their learning. Hannah, who was a

less visible participant in the online discussion came, in chapter 5, to be referred to as an eventual participant, whilst Tim who was a highly visible participant in the online discussion became referred to as a provocateur. This chapter explores Hannah's and Tim's experiences as examples of contrasting roles adopted by individuals in relation to their personal learning in the online discussions.

### **Hannah - The Eventual Participant**

Students who were considered eventual participants posted their weekly posts after taking a certain amount of time. They were usually late contributors in the online discussions and their late contributions could be clearly seen from the online threads in the course. The eventual participants were initially viewed as lurkers in this study. However, in reviewing the eventual participants' actions towards their personal learning, the perception changed from labelling people according to their actions towards viewing individual roles in online discussions. As such, I have moved from labelling Hannah as a lurker towards considering her role to be one of an eventual participant.

#### *Hannah as a Lurker*

Hannah's approach in online discussions was initially regarded as that of a lurker. In the most general sense, lurking is a term that describes a negative behaviour. It refers to a suspicious act of observing with intent to commit a negative action. "The word lurk itself is synonymous with other actions such as skulk, slink and sneak which means to behave so as to escape attention" (Merriam-Webster Online Thesaurus, 2005).

Wordreference.com defines lurking as, “marked by quiet and caution and secrecy; taking pains to avoid being observed.” It is obvious from those general definitions that the word lurk is being connected to sneaky behaviour and a secretive manner. It provides meanings that portray the person who lurks as being aware of their negative intentions and the fact that their intentions could lead to negative consequences or pose a threat to others.

### Hannah’s Background

Hannah was a second year female student. Her initial rationale for doing the course was to get an extra six points, but after she finished the first semester course, she found that it was valuable and beneficial for her degree and she proceeded to take the advanced course in the second semester. She is not a native English speaker and this course was her first opportunity to be involved in online discussions.

### Hannah’s View on Online Discussion in This Course

Hannah valued online discussions as a unique way to communicate and express her ideas. In the first interview, Hannah was really confident in telling me how she went about learning in the first semester course. She clearly described and compared how she learned from lectures and workshops, which had been complemented by the online discussions. By giving an example of the key theme discussed in the course, she tried to make a connection with how the learning process took place for her. She clearly indicated that while lectures were supposed to be the main source of information retrieval in the course,

she felt that she did not value lectures as much as she should have. The workshops in the course provided ample opportunity for students' input and discussions, but for a shy international student like her, this opportunity was simply not taking place. As a listener and unable to get involved in the workshops, she found that she was sometimes struggling to get the whole picture of the topic. For this reason, she used online discussions as means of supporting her learning in the lectures and workshops. The online discussions, then, provided a tool for enhancing her awareness of the topics considered in lectures and workshops.

From the two interviews, Hannah clearly and consistently acknowledged online discussions as a mean towards learning and knowledge. The opportunity to read and respond in the online discussions constituted the main process in her learning in the course. Hannah regarded learning as performing individual actions in order to acquire knowledge. Actions such as considering, thinking, comparing and examining information were paths that lead her to gaining new knowledge.

Learning is an activity we do within ourselves... after certain consideration of what being taught... trying to relate it... or... compare it (Hannah, Interview 2, 16/11/04).

As the central concern of the course was to explore the dynamics of social life, she found that her learning took place when she was exposed to a range of other people's ideas in

the online discussions. In order to learn in the course, it was important for Hannah be able to ponder the issues discussed, especially in the online discussions. She would contribute when she was certain of her ideas and opinions on the issues. If her ideas were different from others, she felt the need to defend her ideas and the online discussion component of the course gave her the opportunity to contribute when she was confident. Because of the online factor of not being able to see faces, she believed that it was necessary for her or other people to be convincing in the discussion.

The above factors contributed to her enthusiasm for using the online discussions in this course in the first semester. However, she felt that time constraints affected her contributions in the online discussions, which made her contribute only the required number of postings in the first semester. In the second semester, however, she struggled to keep pace with the online discussions. She posted fewer than the required postings and did not get involved in the online discussions for some of the weeks. As in the first semester, the moderator required students to post their weekly postings before certain due dates, Hannah felt that the time she needed to be able to ponder on the issues diminished.

As Hannah took quite some time to contribute in the online discussions, her actions could be seen as lurking. Her individual approach of taking her time to read and ponder other people's posts is considered a reserved action that could be seen as non-dynamic in the online discussion environment. On the other hand, Hannah felt that the approach was vital for her in her learning process.



### The Importance of Lurking for Hannah

The lurking process was very important in terms of enabling Hannah to build up her own version of the discussions. The lurking process was seen as learning from others. By lurking, she was able to establish her position in the context, which provided her with the source of the knowledge she required. She was basically working alone but instead of using only her own ideas, she used other people's ideas side by side with her own to build up new ideas. Once she had confirmed her ideas in the online discussions, she would visibly defend her positions.

Hannah clearly indicated that while lectures were supposed to be the main information retrieval in the course, she felt that she did not value lectures as much as she should have. The workshops in this course provided ample opportunity for students' input and discussions, but for a shy international student like her, this opportunity was simply not taken up. As a listener and not being involved in the workshops, she found that she was sometimes struggling to get the whole picture of the topics discussed in the workshops. As a result, she utilised online discussion as a means to support her learning in the lectures and workshops. She clearly stated how she went about learning in this course, which was to use online discussion as a tool to enhance her awareness of the topics under discussion.

I think online discussions clarify what being taught and discussed in the lectures and workshops... justify some issues (Hannah, Interview 1, 03/08/04).

This process of making sense of the information from others helped Hannah clarify her own thinking and gave her confidence in contributing later in the discussions. Although online discussions seemed to be time consuming for her, she concluded her personal learning journal in the first semester by expressing satisfaction with her learning experiences in the online discussion environment.

I have improved my thinking skills... WebCT is an addition to what is being discussed in class, and they have further expanded my knowledge. The WebCT helps me in terms of exposing my thinking to other people's ideas more in order to find useful information and personal opinions on certain subjects. I also feel I have become a better writer of my own personal opinion. I also think that I have gained a lot of confidence expressing my ideas and I also enjoy getting input from others. I have also noticed myself looking for other strategies to solving the problem. I also see myself looking back on what I have said to see what I could have said better or different. I gained valuable skills and confidence about writing and speaking my own ideas in online discussions. I'm not sure if I would be able to do it in the workshops. Even if I did not participate that much, I can still get a compilation of ideas to help me go on with the topics. Writing in the online discussion was a challenging process that helped me focus on my ideas and make sense of what happened surrounding me. I am learning a great deal more than I expected (Hannah, Personal Learning Journal, Week 10).

Hannah's perception of her approach in online discussion parallels my observation of her contributions. My two semesters of observations on the way she contributed her posts confirmed her lurking approach in the online discussion.

### My Observation

From my observations in both semesters, I found that Hannah was not an active contributor in online discussions. In semester one, she contributed only the required postings (except for week eight where she contributed twice). Her contribution in semester two was only half of the required postings. Although she posted less in semester two, her pattern of engagement and contribution remained consistent for both semesters. Hannah's pattern of participation in online discussions is parallel to the general pattern of interactions for delayed participants shows in Figure 8. Figure 8 shows the consistency of the amount of lurking (reading other people's posts) and posting messages.

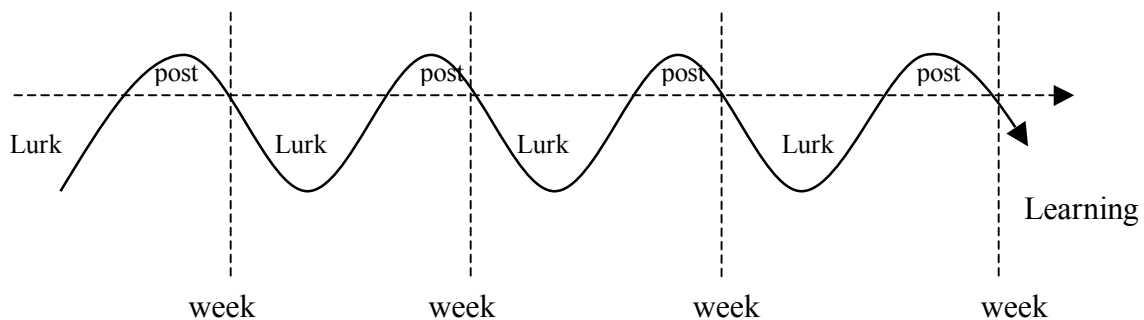


Figure 8. General patterns for delayed participants

Hannah's story suggests that the lurking action contributed to her personal learning. While engaged in reading and listening to the online discussions, her personal learning took place in her individual and personal space. But in view of the fact that posting messages is the only evidence of participation in and contribution to online discussions, people who lurk are still labeled as people who are taking advantage of other people's posting for their own benefit.

#### *Lurking as an Approach in Online Discussion*

In the online environment generally and in online discussions specifically, it is most likely that everyone is a lurker at some point. "Dialogue, in an electronic context, consists not only of speaking, which occurs through writing, but also of listening, which occurs through reading" (Flynn & Polin, 2003, p.13). During the lurking process, it is possible that individuals learn through reading and listen in to what other people say in the setting. Individuals who lurk may have a high degree of potential to contribute within any given topic in the online discussions, but lack the time or willingness to post detailed replies because of certain constraints. Those constraints include the time needed to consider a topic and the need for their response to be well thought out before contributing in the discussion. Being a lurker who uses lurking space as a space to learn involves being there or spatially present in the online discussions. While there are a number of definitions to describe lurkers in the online learning environment, none of the descriptions that I found describe lurkers as individuals who learn through reading, browsing or listening within the online context.

### From Lurker to Eventual Participant

Although Hannah preferred to be less visible in the online discussions and most of her activities involved reading other people's posts, she was more than just a lurker. The pejorative definition of lurking does not reflect the learning strategies being used by Hannah in the online environment. Although, lurking as a learning strategy is seen as beneficial to Hannah, however the strategy is not necessarily acceptable in the online discussion environment. Whilst she read other people's postings, Hannah tried to make sense of the information in the online discussions and also prepared herself to contribute her best ideas on the topics discussed. Labelling Hannah's approach as lurking does not portray the learning that she gained from reading and analysing other people's posts because other people might have also benefited from her delayed responses as the ideas that she contributed were carefully analysed and synthesised before being posted.

Hannah's approach should not be viewed negatively because of the potentially negative connotations of the lurking act in the online environment. It is important not to generalise the reading actions as lurking or label the approach as a "free-rider's" (Salmon, 2002) approach. Hannah's approach can be seen as one of eventual participation since she participated at the end of the weekly discussion sessions once she believed that she had a definite idea to be presented to the audience. She was usually a final participant who hung around invisibly in the online discussions so that she could process the events before taking action (please refer to Figure 8).

### *Hannah as an Eventual Participant*

In order to distinguish between lurkers and eventual participants, characteristics of the eventual participant were established to acknowledge the approach as a learning strategy for certain individuals. The characteristics are based on my observations of the online discussions, the weekly threads, and the contents of the participants' posts. To support the observations, threads and the content of the weekly posts, my interviews with Hannah are used to confirm her action in the online discussion.

### Characteristics of the Eventual Participant

There are three attributes that define eventual participants in this study. The first attribute is posting messages from the middle to the end of the weekly threads. Eventual participants did not start a thread at all in this study and they were usually visible after half of the other students posted their messages for the weekly discussions. The second attribute of an eventual participant in this study is that he/she referred to other people's posts as a point of reference in their own posts. When an eventual participant referred to other people's posts, they had clearly taken time to read other people's posts before posting their own contributions. The final attribute of an eventual participant is determined by his/her acknowledgment that he/she was responding thoughtfully to other people's posts. While the first two attributes could be established from the threads in the online discussions, the third attribute could only be established through interview and from the personal learning journals of the participants in this study. In the remainder of this section, I show how three attributes apply to the students I have referred to as eventual participants.

*i. Late Contribution in Online Discussion*

Students who were considered eventual participants made their weekly posts after taking a certain amount of time. They were usually late contributors which can be clearly seen in the online discussions threads.. In the process of iterating between the online discussion setting and individual contributions, I identified three participants who could be considered as eventual participants, one of whom was Hannah. The results of the analysis for all students' postings are represented in Table 8. The numbers in the week column indicate the place of individual postings in relation to other's weekly posts.

**Table 8: Order of individual postings in relation to others' weekly posts**

| Week<br>Student                | Week<br>1 | Week<br>2 | Week<br>3 | Weel<br>4 | Week<br>5 | Week<br>6 | Week<br>7 | Week<br>8 | Week<br>9 | Week<br>10 | Total<br>posted<br>postings |
|--------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------------------------|
| Hannah                         | 22        | 23        | 16        | 40        | 25        | 24        | 18        | 13,20     | 17        | 15         | 11                          |
| <b>Lisa</b>                    | 19        | 12        | 13        | 37        | 37        | 14        | 13        | 22        | 13        | 12         | 10                          |
| <b>Mary</b>                    | 18        | 17        | 15        | 34        | 22        | 21        | 15        | 21        | 8         | 14         | 10                          |
| Total<br>number of<br>postings | 22        | 27        | 16        | 40        | 25        | 24        | 21        | 27        | 17        | 16         |                             |

Table 8 shows the order of eventual participants' postings positions compared to the total number of postings and demonstrates that Hannah, Lisa and Mary were late contributors

in the online discussions. The order of posting would categorize them as eventual participants in this study.

*ii. Use of Other People's Posts as a Point of Reference*

To further clarify their positions as eventual participants in this study, I looked closely at the content of their discussions and found that these three students all referred to other people's posts in their postings. That was the indication that they read other people's postings before they posted their own messages. For example, Lisa referred to other students' postings by indicating her agreement and by mentioning specific names, whilst Hannah made a generalisation about what she agreed on.

I agree with Nancy though what she said was a lot to do wit (Lisa, Week 4, Semester 1).

But yes I agree that there is and isn't (Mary, week 8, semester 1).

Hannah also referred to other people's postings to indicate her agreement and disagreement regarding issues. She pointed out that she agreed with some people's viewpoints and also summarised other people's messages by stating her disagreement. For example, in the following excerpt, she directly addressed Tim:

I agree with everyone who has said there is no victimless crime, as they have all already explained, human interact way too much for actions not to effect each



other in some way. Tim: Of course there would be victims even if someone killed everyone in the world. Why do have lawyers representing dead people in court? You might say its because their relatives and friends are victims (which there would be none of in your example) but saying there are no victims because there are dead is like saying, an animal or baby can't feel or think because they can't represent themselves to you in your language. Sorry for actually taking your example seriously instead of joining you on your fun filled journey in WebCT of being 'far-fetched' and interesting, but, I think that its not interesting if what you write doesn't back itself up (Hannah, week 7, semester 1).

The online thread indicated that the three participants would be considered eventual participants as they had clearly read other people's posts before posting their own messages in the online discussions.

### *iii. Acknowledgement of the Reading Strategy*

Of the three participants, Hannah agreed to be interviewed. She was also one of the eventual participants who had agreed to write a Personal Learning Journal of the online discussion experience at the beginning of semester one. Hannah's interviews and Personal Learning Journal indicated that she needed the reading space in online discussions in order for her to learn.

From my analysis, I identified these three important factors that led to Hannah's engagement as an eventual participant in the online discussions:

- a. Her view of learning
- b. The opportunity for delayed response
- c. The nature of knowledge sought

a. Her view of learning

Hannah viewed learning as something she did to obtain new information and gaining new knowledge. She also pointed out that learning is,

An activity that people do within themselves after certain consideration of what is being taught (Hannah, Interview 2, 16/11/04).

Learning for her is an internal process. To be able to gain knowledge, she needs time to ponder the information obtained for her learning. The personal activity, which she referred to as occurring in "her head processor," relates to cognitive actions such as considering, comparing and making connections between information. Moreover, the actions involved looking for convincing clarification by reading or searching for more information. She consistently used descriptions such as, "looking back on," "compare ideas," "reading," "relate...opinions and ideas," which highlighted her need to be exposed to other people's ideas and perceptions within the learning context. She was really confident in telling me how she went about learning in the first semester course, which was by making connections between her own personal actions and her context. The

interviews also revealed her effort to make connections between lectures, workshops and online discussions in the course. The process of making connections between the personal and social context was vital for her learning.

#### b. The Opportunity for Delayed Response

Online discussions offered Hannah a different way of processing information than that encountered in lectures and workshops. She was able to take time in making her contribution to the weekly posts. This delay in responding enabled her to:

- Read and consider the topic discussed before responding
- Defend and give concrete reasons for her ideas
- Be in control of her learning and able to make decisions
- Consider other's ideas and offer considered ideas of her own

For Hannah, online discussion in this course offered exposure to other people's ideas.

We can read other people's ideas. We can think and do some research on our own before posting our messages... I notice that I can see the bigger picture of an issue and I can stimulates my mind and develop ideas by reading and contributing in the online discussions. The online discussions definitely increased my confidence and critical awareness (Hannah, Interview 2, 16/11/04).

The online discussions also gave her the chance to analyse and examine her ideas thoroughly before posting them for public viewing. The time spent before posting

messages was a time for her to read and gain her confidence sufficiently to contribute in the online discussions. Evidence of her actions was presented clearly in her personal learning journal.

I have read some of other students' posts. Some of their ideas make sense  
....What I am going to do now is I need to understand what other people were  
saying, try to relate my own opinion with others and see how my ideas fit with  
others.

I'll wait until I have read some of other people's posts before I write my own...

I'm not going to copy other people's ideas, but I am going to compare what I have  
in my mind with others. (Hannah, Personal Learning Journal, week 4).

Hannah's experiences of learning in online discussions, therefore, involved the act of visiting and revisiting other people's posts in order to learn. There were stages when she was lurking (reading other people's posts without posting herself) and there were also times when she was situated in her own space considering and making sense of other people's ideas. Lurking dominated her space of learning in online discussions before she took a step further in contributing her portion of the discussions. For her, the most important part of the whole interaction was being able to hear different voices and ideas. Her process of learning involved reading other people's postings, thinking about other people's ideas, constructing her responses offline, and posting the responses when she felt ready and confident. To be able to contribute after she was really certain about her

eventual position in the argument was important for her and her learning. Her process of learning could be divided into 3 main stages of rationalization as shown in Figure 9.

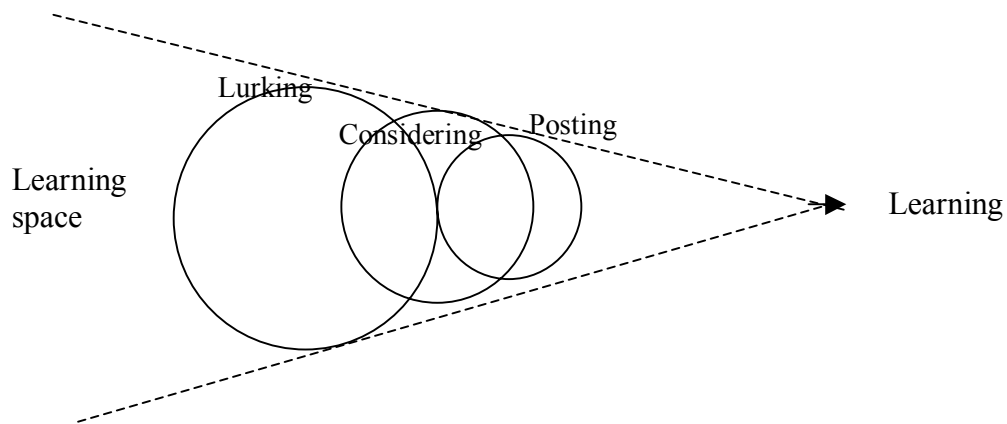


Figure 9. The notion of Hannah's learning space

The learning space focused on Hannah's specific learning process. It is a convergent learning style, which enabled her to build on her own self-criticism before she was certain about her postings in the online discussions. Within the notion of Hannah's learning space in Figure 9, lurking was the dominant action that intersected largely with the act of considering. The process of consideration could be seen as the process of analysing and synthesising the information she got from lurking, before she contributed to the discussions. Although we couldn't see the process of social interaction visibly, the lurking activity was dominated by the interaction between her and the content posted by other people. She obviously valued online discussions as "a unique way to communicate and express my ideas" (Hannah, Interview 2, 16/11/04). She communicated and

expressed her ideas after remaining within her personal learning space (reading other people's posts) for a certain amount of time.

### c. The Nature of Knowledge Sought

Hannah saw the online discussion setting as providing access to the knowledge she sought in the course. Knowledge was seen as in there in the online discussions and she was able to build her own knowledge by performing certain actions that led to knowledge in the course. From both interviews, Hannah clearly and consistently acknowledged online discussion as a means towards learning and gaining knowledge.

I would say that there is a connection between knowledge and online discussions ... knowledge is something that we gain from reading, doing ... and from our experience. ... people were talking and discussing a lot of things in there. In order to establish and defend a position on a controversial issue related to the course topics, people always tried to give strong reasons to influence other peoples thinking. Because we did not see each other during the discussion, the reasons must be really strong and reliable. The most important thing is that our knowledge must be shown through our words ... I always responded to a message after I had thought deeply about what I was going to say and I would try to establish a good point with strong reasons. That was the knowledge that I contributed in the discussion (Hannah, Interview 2, 16/11/04).

Hannah's actions during the learning process are illustrated in Figure 9. She only posted when she perceived that she clarified her learning. Actions such as considering, thinking, comparing and examining information in online discussions are paths that lead her to gaining new knowledge. This shows the constructivist part of her learning process. Other people's postings encouraged her to think and revise her own understanding. Because of the importance of her own space of learning in the online discussions, she felt that learning in them in the second semester was a mixture of struggle, unpleasantness and disappointment. She voiced her discouragement about not being able to contribute in the online discussions because of time constraints and the due dates for postings especially in the second semester. In the first semester, there were no due dates in contributing the weekly posts and students were able to post their contributions at their own pace. However, in semester two, there was a time-line for each week's posts and students were not able to post messages after the due dates.

Defending her ideas in the online discussions was very important to Hannah's learning in this course. Because of the online factor (not able to see faces), she believed that it was necessary to be convincing in the discussions. In the second semester, however, she felt that to keep up with the pace of the online discussions was a difficult task. The opportunity that she sensed in the first semester diminished because she could not contribute before the due dates. As she adopted some forms of the lurking during her learning process in the online discussions and the time available to read and ponder over issues had decreased because she needed to contribute before the weekly due dates. This restricted the time available for constructing her personal learning.

### Eventual Participant as a Role in Online Discussions

As an eventual participant in online discussions, Hannah was a highly engaged learner but lacked visibility. She navigated her learning in online discussions by being less visible in order to build up her confidence and certainty before contributing. She was definitely not a free-rider in the online discussions because the action of eventual participation was beneficial to her personal learning. However, although Hannah's role as an eventual participant could be seen as facilitating her personal learning, her high level of invisibility in the online discussions caused discomfort and concern amongst tutors. The eventual participants' lack of involvement and visibility in the discussion sessions may suggest that they were not engaged, potentially creating tension with moderators.

### The Tutors and the Eventual Participant

Generally, there were tensions between tutors and students concerning the act of lurking (in the sense that they were reading more than discussing). Tutors eventually felt the need for students to contribute more in the discussions while students needed the space and time before they could contribute. "The tendency under these circumstances is to do nothing and wait and see. Unfortunately, if all students are engaged in the game of wait and see, it undermines participation" (Lauzon, Gallant and Rimkus, 2000, p.326). While there are positive and negative perceptions from the students' and tutors' points of view, there is a need to take risks; either to accept lurking as a way of learning in online discussions for tutors or to contribute and express ideas more for students who learn from reading other people's posts, such as the eventual participants. It should be possible to find a compromise between students and tutors to enable a more positive outcome for



both parties.

Although Beatrice identified some students as lurkers, it is clear that she did not consider the learning that might occur as a result of lurking in the online discussions.

She did not talk about how lurking might contribute to students' learning as there was no evidence that the students read other people's posts and ideas. However, she did realise that there was much information provided by different students in the online discussions that might be useful to others.

There are such a lot of different responses and I think that's perhaps the benefit, even when somebody says something that might not be very acceptable to others ... you get ... I guess by learning what you don't like is learning what you think as well. So that they can compare different view themselves which one is I think is right, so they got lots to choose from, rather than just me and my ideas and the lecturers and their ideas and they have lots of different ideas from old students, young students and students who grow up somewhere completely different (Beatrice, Tutor's Interview, 20/08/04).

While Beatrice did not indicate her disapproval of lurking behavior, the requirement for students to post their contributions within a certain date in semester two constituted an act of surveillance by the tutor. Surveillance is considered one of way of discouraging lurkers. While such surveillance may resolve the problem of late postings for tutors, students might feel the tension to contribute despite insufficient preparation. This tension could lead to an unsatisfactory position for both tutors and students. It is clear that the

extent to which different individuals engaged in the online discussion environment had a critical influence on the individual learners' personal learning. Recognizing delayed response for tutors is one way for tutors to consider the need for students to ponder over an issue.

Thus, there are tensions between tutors and students concerning the act of lurking. Most tutors feel the need for students to contribute in order for the discussions to be a discussion and not just a question and answer session. However, some students feel the need for space and time before they can contribute. As such, I argue that while there are positive and negative perceptions on both sides, there is a need to take risks; either for tutors to accept lurking or for students to contribute and express ideas more. A surprising finding from this study was how different the perceptions of the tutor and the students were. Whilst, the tutor did not indicate her disapproval of lurking behavior, there were regulations to make sure that the discussions were posted by a certain date.

The surveillance act by tutors is considered one way of discouraging lurkers. However, it also could be seen as a way of ensuring participation. Whilst the surveillance act resolved the problems of late postings for tutors, students might have felt the tension to contribute although they have not prepared enough. This tension could lead to an unsatisfactory position for both tutors and students. It is clear that the extent to which different individuals engaged in the online discussions environment had a critical influence on the individual learners' personal learning. This led to the challenge of students to explore

different roles in online discussions and the challenge for tutors to allocate different roles for students.

### **Tim - The Provocateur**

The findings of this study indicate that a provocateur is highly visible and highly engaged in learning in the online discussions. In this study, provocateurs were initially viewed as bullies because of their disapproving attitude towards other students during the online discussions. However, while the provocateur sometimes stirred the online discussion sessions by using disapproving words or attitudes, I found that the approach could also result in vibrant and meaningful discussions as the actions of the provocateur became the unofficial invitation for other students to be involved in the topics. This section focuses on how such provoking actions can contribute to personal learning.

#### *Tim as a Bully*

During the initial stage of the analysis, I labelled Tim as a bully in the online discussions in this course. Throughout that stage, although I viewed his approach somewhat negatively, I also considered the positive outcomes from it. The positive impact of his approach has made me reconsider the term I initially used to label Tim.

### Tim's Background

Tim was a first year male student. Although he had limited experience with online discussions, he was a regular internet user and he was really positive about using the WebCT discussions at the beginning of the first semester course. From my observations and the evidence from both semester one and semester two, he was an active participant in the online discussions. He was a regular contributor to the weekly discussions and he always tried to provoke other students to contribute by asking questions and probing other students. It appeared that sometimes he deliberately tried to annoy his co-learners in order to stimulate their contributions.

### Tim's View on Online Discussions in This Course

Tim considered that online discussions gave him the opportunity to collect a range of information from different people. The flexibility in the online discussions gave him the chance to explore certain issues in-depth by comparing information provided by other students during the discussions. The relational nature of the course stimulated his interest in other people's perceptions and experiences, which enabled him to make judgements and form his own opinions on the issues discussed. The arguments that sometimes occurred in the online discussions helped him to construct his own knowledge.

In this way, Tim also demonstrated his eagerness to explore the online discussions as a tool for his learning. He clearly indicated that his learning process in the online discussions involved debating and constructing arguments in order to find out more about

certain issues. He found online discussions to be a very interesting part of the course. Other people's comments on his ideas helped him to evaluate his own thinking. He agreed that the informal nature of the online discussions also provided him with the flexibility to use different approaches for his personal learning. He felt that the unconventional approach of the online discussions provided him with more real life experiences from his peers. Although he realised that he offended certain people during the online discussions, he believed that was an opportunity to be totally open in expressing his ideas and was the special aspect of online discussion.

Tim indicated that the interactions in the online discussions helped him to reinforce and revisit his existing knowledge. The interactions and dialogue that he experienced with his co-learners in the online discussions provided rich information to enable him to satisfy his curiosity and uncertainty about certain issues. Tim's participation and level of confidence in using online discussions increased from semester one to semester two. He was objective about his own learning and the availability and flexibility that the online discussions gave him as an opportunity to enhance his own learning. He found the online discussion environment to be a pertinent place to explore his learning styles and preferences. However, this process caused him to be labelled negatively in the online discussions in this course.

## My Observations

Tim liked using words in an apt, clever, and amusing way that sometimes irritated some of his co-learners. In other words, he provoked other people in order to generate interaction and so that the discussion site would not be a dull place to be in. Even though he had no problem getting involved in the face-to-face discussions, he believed that the online discussions provided a more stimulating experience for him. He was really confident in his ability to discuss and encourage other students to be involved.

### *Bullying as an approach in online discussion*

The term bully was generated in this study from the tutor's interview when Beatrice mentioned the need to deal with bullying in online discussions. Before the interview with her, I did not place the participants into specific categories. My interview with Beatrice indirectly influenced my perception of Tim as a bully in the online discussions with,

I think I need to have a clear strategy to deal with bullies. It's been a problem every year and particularly a problem this year. I need to think of how to deal with these people creatively because they have the right to be in there too but they don't have the right to bully other (Beatrice, Tutor Interview, 20/8/04).

Although Beatrice did not name any students that she labelled as a bully, I made the assumption that Tim was one of the bullies as there were instances when Beatrice had tried to stop conversations started by Tim that were becoming too personal and

unpleasant. In one of these instances, Beatrice reminded students to read the WebCT guide on online etiquette with,

You guys might like to read the piece in the WebCT guide about ‘WebCT etiquette’. I think it is great that you can have an intense discussion about something but it is not okay to start trading personal insults. It tends to shut down conversation and some people might think twice about posting again! Now go to your corners and think what about you’ve done. (Beatrice, Week 3, Semester 2).

There were students who apologised for their behaviour after reading Beatrice’s statement. But Tim continued to provoke the discussion participants. Beatrice then posted another message.

Okay so now stop... please (Beatrice, Week 3, Semester 2).

However, there were still students, including Tim, who ignored Beatrice’s statements. The conversation continued and there were fourteen more messages posted in the conversation including four messages from Tim. It is obvious that Beatrice was pointing at Tim as the initiator of personal insults since, during the conversation, Tim had used another student’s name as part of a joke. Although Tim admitted in the discussion that he was only joking, there were some students who were really annoyed with his attitude and made the following comments about what they called a ridiculous joke.

Hey Susan...was a JOKE! A slight innuendo at an oxymoron (Tim, Week 3, Semester 2).

Tim's behaviour was unacceptable, but it should not be labelled so passively. Despite the fact that Tim was sometimes over-anxious in the online discussions, which led him to over-rule and appear ignorant during the discussions, his actions did invite very robust and lively discussions in some of the weeks during the course. I wondered if the discussions would have ever become so energetic without him playing his role.

I presented these initial findings in a seminar at the University Centre for Teaching and Learning in August 2005. The purpose of the seminar was to get some feedback and insights from other people on my initial findings in the research. One of the questions asked in the seminar was, "Would you use the word bully to represent the student (Tim), if the word bully had not been highlighted by the tutor (Beatrice) during the interview?" The question made me think again and I re-analysed the data related to Tim's types of interaction and found that the word bully seemed an inappropriate label for Tim. I realised that the word bully had influenced my initial findings even though at that time I had also considered the positive side of Tim's approach in the online discussions. I then tried to look for the definition of the word bully both outside and within the online environment. The problem that I faced in using the term bully was that there were no



positive definitions or outcomes highlighted as the result of a bullying act, whilst from my analysis there were positive effects from Tim's actions in the online discussions. The tutor for this course viewed the bullying behaviour of the students in the online discussions as unacceptable in terms of the expected behaviour and ethics. Going back to Tim's strategies in the online discussions, it is clear that he realised that his attitudes irritated other students and the online transcripts also indicated that some students were feeling irritated by Tim's attitudes, directness and use of strong words. His bullying attitude was clearly identified in the second semester's online transcripts. However, if Tim was a definite bully in terms of deliberately bullying and harassing other people, he would not be apologising for his negative attitude during the online discussion session.

I didn't intend any aggression, I just disagree with everything you said, and maybe I was a little intense so for that I apologise (Tim, week 3, semester 2).

He also acknowledged that his eagerness to elicit more information from other students resulted in an unpleasant situation in the online discussions.

Sometimes I was quite frustrated because of the lack of response from other students. Sometimes this desire can be bad, because I sometimes try to do something to encourage other students to be in the discussions (like provoking them into an argument) and it turns out bad, which I don't really like (Tim, Personal Learning Journal, Week 8, Semester 1).

By provoking others in the online discussions, Tim not only established his own position, but he also significantly progressed the discussions in order to involve other inactive students. This behaviour is somehow the opposite of being a bully, as a bully tends to try and prevent other people from joining the discussions, but a provocateur tends to want others to join the discussions. In order to establish the relationships between provocation and Tim's learning approach, I looked at the definitions of provocateurs and considered them in relation to Tim's background and learning approach.

#### From Bully to Provocateur

The word bully seems to be a very strong word that indicates a negative action that does not benefit any person involved. However, the definition of the word provocateur shows what a provocateur does to invite action in a situation. The word provocateur originated from the word "provoke" which means, "to arouse a feeling or action" and "to incite anger" (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2005). It also means, "to call forth (as a feeling or action) or to stir up purposely (such as *provoke* a fight) **or** to provide the needed stimulus for (such as will *provoke* a lot of discussion)" (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2005).

Provocation is the act of provoking somebody or something by making the person angry or indignant. In this study, the act of provocation occurred when some of the students tried to get other students to join the online discussions by annoying them and using

infuriating words. Although the use of those words was deemed inappropriate by some, it undoubtedly invited more inactive students to express their ideas and perceptions of the topics under discussion. Tim's acts of provocation helped him to develop his personal learning in this course and encouraged other students to be involved the online discussions. This analysis suggests that it could be important for moderators to consider the roles of provocateurs and try to find ways to promote positive outcomes and decrease the negative consequences from the provoking approach.

### *Tim as a Provocateur*

#### Characteristics of the Provocateur

Although I tried hard to find other instances of provocation through the analysis of the data, only Tim could be categorized as a provocateur in this study. There are four characteristics that identify Tim as a provocateur in the online discussions. These characteristics are:

- i. Active participation in the online discussions
- ii. Encouragement of other students to be involved in the online discussions
- iii. Intrinsic motivation for participation as opposed to assessment
- iv. High level of engagement in learning & discussions

*i. Active participation in the online discussions*

Although he was new to online discussions in this course in semester one, Tim was considered an active participant as he posted more than the required one posting per week. Therefore, it is clear that his contributions in the online discussions were not just to meet the required number of postings. Table 9 shows his weekly contributions in semester two and indicates that his contribution had risen in week seven to five messages that week.

**Table 9: Number of Tim's postings for semester one and two**

| Week            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Total number of postings | Patterns of participation |
|-----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>Semester</b> |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |                          |                           |
| 1               | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 6 | 1 | 1  | 18                       | Active                    |
| 2               | 2 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 2 | 3 | 2  | 32                       | Active                    |

In semester two, Tim had moved from being a novice user of the online discussions towards becoming a more experienced user. It is clearly shown in his contributions in the online discussions in semester two that he was always there and that he posted more than the required one posting per week for almost every week.

*ii. Encouragement of Other Students to be Involved in the Online Discussions*

In semester one I assumed that, because Tim was new to online discussions, he was still exploring the environment. That might be the reason that he did not contribute as much as he did in semester two. In most of the weeks in semester two, he contributed more than once and he used different strategies to encourage other students to be involved in the online discussions (please refer to Table 9).

The strategies used included responding to other people's posts, trying to start a discussion by questioning others and provoking others by using his own ideas and reasoning. He was really into the online discussions and kept changing strategies in order to "dig" (to use Tim's own word – see Personal Learning Journal, Week 7 quoted below) and obtain new knowledge from other students. For example, sometimes he tried to start a new discussion (a starter) and sometimes he tried to follow the rhythm of the discussions before contributing his part (a follower). Figure 10 illustrates the different strategies used by Tim in weeks two and three for semester two's online discussions.

**Key:**

- O** - His original message
- OS** - Other students' original messages
- HR** - His response
- NR** - No response
- PR** - Other people's responses

**Thread 1**

**1<sup>st</sup> attempt** (Message No. 9) :

O → NR

(No response to his original message, so he stopped)

**Thread 2**

**2<sup>nd</sup> attempt** (Message No. 17) :

O → PR → HR → PR → HR → PR → HR

(When somebody responded to his message, he tried to keep the discussion going until no more responses were posted by others)

**Thread 3**

**3<sup>rd</sup> attempt** (Message No. 24):

OS → PR → HR → PR → HR → PR

(He responded to other people's messages and kept the discussion going)

Figure 10. Tim's different provoking strategies

In Figure 10, thread one shows that when there was no response to his message, the conversation stopped immediately. However, in thread two, when somebody responded to his original message, the thread became longer and Tim became engaged with the discussion and contributed until the conversation stopped. Thread 3 revealed that Tim was indeed following (or might be lurking in) the overall discussions and posted his contribution in relation to other people's original messages.

He sometimes started the weekly discussions by trying to encourage and provoke other people to participate. He also questioned other students' ideas by trying to rationalize and give reasons for his own ideas during the discussions.

I'm sorry to offend you here, but what are you talking about?

"we are at our most informative from birth to aged four years old"?? (Tim quotes other student's post) ... It sounds like you are quoting to ... Also I have no idea what "psychological engineering: is. Is it like making a brain or something? Or ...?? Lastly, we are being "brainwashed" just as much as at university today as the kids of today are by TV, except now we are being told that McDonalds is ... instead of McDonalds is good ... would you say we were being brainwashed before you came to uni? If so, then why is education the answer (Tim, Week 3, Semester 2)?

Tim also tried to rationalize his ideas by providing concrete evidence such as giving a definition of a word.

Informative = “adjective – providing a lot of useful information” – Internet dictionary... Perhaps relative to their previous knowledge, 4 years olds may be “informative”(Tim, Week 3, Semester 2).

The overall strategies used by Tim changed when necessary and he used different strategies depending on the situations he encountered during the online discussion sessions. He also clearly indicated in his interview that he used those strategies to trigger ideas from other people.

I realised that sometimes I was really sarcastic or sometimes I was being playful. I remember telling you in the first interview that some of the people hid their true feelings in the online discussions. I think that it was really important for me to dig some more stuff which was not already there in order to find something new. The way I did that was by provoking other students in the online discussion... Because when we argue about something, we always try to find the best reasons to support our ideas. And people do not give a reason without giving some ... deep thought about it. Their reasons helped me to formulate my thinking in the issue discussed. But, sometimes I think I need to keep the discussion interesting. There were lots of big issues and concepts in the course ... Sometimes it made us tense and caused us to try to kill each other with our words...A little distraction would be good (Tim, Interview 2, 12/11/04).



From the evidence in the online threads and interviews, it is clear that Tim kept changing his strategies. He was sometimes a starter of a discussion and sometimes he acted as a follower. Either way, he tried to encourage other students to be actively involved in the online discussions so that he would be able to learn from other people's experiences or perceptions.

*iii. Motivation for Participation not Assessment Oriented*

From Tim's actions in the online discussions, especially in semester two, it is clear that assessment or getting marks for the course was not his main goal in the online discussions as he would have gained only 5% for the total 10 posted messages for one semester of the course and his overall messages for both semesters greatly exceeded the number of required posts. He mentioned in his personal journal that,

I found myself struggling not to focus all my time on the online discussions... I had not anticipated the amount of time I would spend online, reading and responding to questions. I think it causes you to dig a little more, to learn how to think about the information on a deeper level. You can't just accept everything that you read (Tim, Personal Learning Journal, Week 7).

From the above statement, Tim clearly had not been thinking about the marks that he would get for engaging in the online discussions. Rather, he found himself deeply engaged in critically reflecting on the issues discussed. Tim's learning could be viewed as a divergent learning space (please refer to Figure 11).

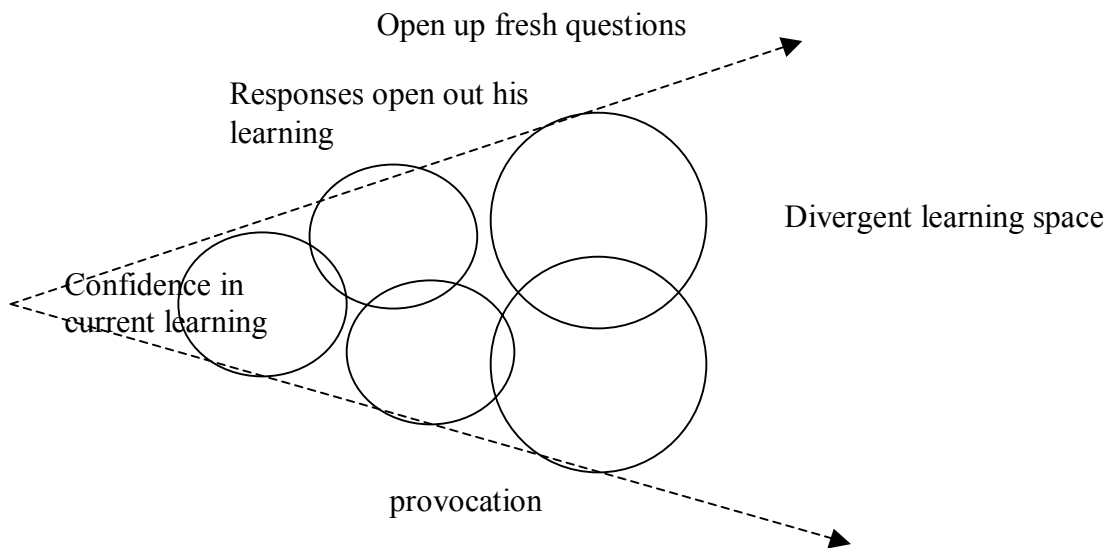


Figure 11. Tim's divergent learning space

Tim's divergent learning space is a space where his learning occurred through his active involvement in the learning space. Tim started with a confident in his current learning. In order to build up his own knowledge in online discussion, he opened up fresh questions, respond and provoke others to be involved in the discussions.

*iv. High level of Engagement in Learning and Discussions*

Tim showed a high level of engagement in learning and the online discussions. He was self-motivated and strategically involved in the online discussions. As an active participant, he evidently tried to optimise the online discussions as a means for his personal learning. Given that online discussion is a method for sharing knowledge between people, Tim needed to encourage that knowledge sharing in order to advance his own knowledge construction. He also believed that ideas and opinions are negotiable and subject to change after certain consideration.

I found that I was curious to find out what other people thought about certain issues, and their perceptions were important to me in order for me to establish my own view of an issue. I guess that the information or contribution from other people can be presumed as knowledge ... in sociology context, I can accept what I want and decline what I don't feel is relevant to my own thinking ... even if the ideas came from the tutor or somebody else. The online discussion made me curious ... curious to explore more about other people's opinions ... the semester is over but the online discussion has given me that experience of learning ... that I enjoy. I will experience this feeling as long as I seek out new and exciting challenges ... that was debating and arguing and ... getting people to talk about their opinions and experiences ... to enhance my own learning ... I think there is definitely a connection between online discussions and knowledge (Tim, Interview 2, 12/11/04).

As the knowledge located in the online discussions is within a social location, the engagement in the discussions became vital for Tim in order for him to establish his own position in the topics discussed in the online discussions. Other people's views were important to him to help clarify and support his judgement of the issues discussed. The process of identifying the relationship between his ideas and other people's ideas was very important to enable him to establish the new knowledge that he sought for his own learning in this course.

I also feel that the online discussion makes me desire to discuss more deeply certain topics (Tim, Personal Learning Journal, Week 10).

#### *Provocateur as a Role in Online Discussion*

Tim provoked other students in the online discussions in this course for three reasons:

- i. To encourage other students to be involved in the online discussions so that the discussions were discussions and not just answers to the tutor's questions.
- ii. To enable him to collect information on the topics based on other students' experiences.
- iii. To test and evaluate his own capability and knowledge in the course by comparing and debating in the online discussions.

However, Tim realised that his attitude towards the online discussions was sometimes too harsh for some of his peers. He admitted that he used that kind of approach to get into the

minds of other discussion participants. By provoking other students, he was able to find the answers that he was seeking in a topic.

Tim as *the grit in an oyster* is a useful way to think of the provocateur in this study. The grit seeds the pearl. Tim could be seen as the grit that seeds the pearl of knowledge through discussion. In terms of the online discussions in this course, Tim could be seen as one of the students who triggered contributions from other students because of his own eagerness to learn. While provocation is an act that sometimes creates discomfort within others, it can also contribute to personal and collective learning. The provoking actions can lead to more new ideas by inviting more people to participate, including those who participated little, including peripheral participants, occasional participants and eventual participants as discussed in Chapter Five. Provocative actions can generate more vibrant discussions. Tim should not be viewed as a bully; rather he was playing the role of a provocateur (by provoking others) in order to encourage other people in the online discussions. Being a provocateur could be defined as adopting some highly assertive (bullying) strategies as a means to get other people talking and involved in the online discussions, while not meaning to harass or threaten other people in ways that could make them feel reluctant to be involved.

#### The Tutors and the Provocateur

In the online discussions, provocateurs could be seen as challenging the tutors' control in two ways. First, provocateurs sometimes ignored the instructions of the tutors in the

online discussions and overlooked the tutors' efforts in trying to consider other people's feelings. While the provocateur's approach in this study tends to suggest there was learning as a result of the provoking approach, the perception of rudeness from the provoking act resulted in discomfort for the tutor. As such, some tutors give no marks for inappropriate, rude, derisive or profane postings.

Second, provocateurs sometimes inadvertently discouraged other people during online discussions or conversations. By discouraging others, provocateurs increase the tutor's responsibility for encouraging participation. To counteract the negative impacts of provocation, tutors need to highlight cyber-ethics and fully emphasize the ethics of the online behaviour at the beginning of the course. "Ethics is about understanding how your actions affect other people, knowing what is right and wrong and taking personal responsibility for your actions - even if they are legal" (Schwartz, 2001, p.25).

It is important that tutors recognise that the provocateur exists in online discussions and that they encourage provocateurs outside online discussion sessions to be more tolerant and positive in their actions of provoking other people. To develop the provocative behaviour as a positive contribution to individual or social learning is not easy, but an early recognition of the provoking attitude could lead to more learning rather than more intolerable behaviour. Provoking can be seen as a positive behaviour and should be encouraged in an online discussion environment. For example, Tim's actions and behaviour were actually intended to encourage other students to be involved in the online

discussions and to satisfy his own curiosity or interest in order to learn. Tim's provoking actions could be interpreted as an attempt to engage his peers by providing amusing and interesting material or words. By provoking other people in the online discussions, he not only engaged in his own personal learning but also triggered engagement in others, which might contribute to their learning. Lauzon, Gallant and Rimkus (2000) suggest that, "online environments can support the development of active learning skills in students who are ready to rise to the challenge of succeeding in the new environment" (p.326). As such, it is important that the challenging act by the provocateur is recognised as an approach used by some learners within online discussion. This analysis raises fresh questions which are beyond the scope of this study about how tutors address and deal with provocateurs, and how participants can be encouraged to provoke discussions in ways that are accepted and understood by the group. Such research would benefit both tutors and the provocateurs.

## Summary

This chapter presented two important findings in this study; the roles of an *eventual participant* and a *provocateur* in online discussions. The stories of two participants in this study provided a clearer view on how different approaches to online discussions resulted in personal learning within that environment. By drawing on the voices of Hannah and Tim and the evidence of their actions in the online discussions, it has been possible for me to open up questions about students' approaches in the online discussion environment and how such approaches might contribute to their personal learning in different and unexpected ways. The findings show that each of the participants had a rationale for their

online contributions and for their online actions that was consistent with the ways in which they explained their own understandings of learning. This suggests that by expanding students' understanding of various forms of learning and participation, it may be possible for tutors to enhance online learning by fostering various forms of online participation.



## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

We must learn our limits. We are all something, but none of us are everything.

Blaise Pascal, 1670

Pascal's quotation points to a way of looking at the contributions of this research to the overall area of online discussions and their relationship to learning. Although this research focused on a limited area in online discussions, it opens up a path for further exploration of individual roles in learning in that type of environment. The research started with a focus on personal learning in online discussions and concludes with suggestions for a different way of seeing individual roles in online discussion by developing a *Types of Online Interaction Model*. This research contributes to understanding some aspects of online discussions, and the findings benefit certain areas in considering the online discussion environment, but they are not everything. The findings of this research suggest that there are different roles that individuals adopt in online discussions. From the findings, I suggested that an individual does not necessarily assume a fixed role in online discussion but, instead, chooses to adopt various roles in order to foster meaningful discussion. Such findings could help tutors of online discussions look at individual roles more closely in order to understand and support personal learning in the online discussion process.

## **Thesis Summary**

This thesis has explored how interactions and engagement in online discussions contribute to personal learning. The rationale behind this effort has been the concern about adopting online discussions as an instructional method in higher education primarily because of the availability and technological opportunities the method provides. Whilst research acknowledges the benefit of online discussion (e.g., Bradshaw & Hinton, 2004; Salmon 2000, 2002), how individuals perceive they learn from the method has been less explored. It is the concern of this study that the use of online discussions should focus more on the usefulness of these tools for students' learning. The adoption of online discussion as a complement to face-to-face learning should be done with the intention of engaging students in the learning process and contributing to their personal learning.

The findings of this study recognise individuals' adopted roles in online discussions. These adopted roles comprise the individuals' approaches and actions, which contribute to personal learning. Although some participants chose to adopt fixed roles, the roles can also be fluid. While establishing their roles in online discussions, learners are also negotiating meaning through the interaction and engagement. Different roles provide different types of engagement and visibility in online discussion. Some roles are more visible than others. However, an individual's visibility does not necessarily indicate that person's level of engagement in learning. The roles could be seen as individual learning during the engagement in the online discussions. Furthermore, students' interaction in online discussions is not static; it constantly evolves, which implies that individual roles

are also constantly changing.

As participants in the online community of learners in this course, students engaged with each other rather than only with the tutors, thereby allowing individual learning strategies to be used as one way of gaining knowledge from each other. However, individuals who are less motivated to be involved in the online discussions are less likely to use such strategies. With motivation, individuals are more likely to move towards more positive roles in online discussions and their learning. As such, it is important for individuals to be motivated to enable them to recognise their online discussion learning strategies.

### **Thesis Contributions**

The findings of this study indicate that personal learning is facilitated through various forms of engagement in an online discussion environment. The two case studies show two different ways of engaging in an online discussion community of learners. The case studies start with a less positive description of individual approaches and end up with describing individuals adopt roles in online discussions. The roles emerge from students' personal interpretations of how their approaches contributed to their personal learning. Recognising the roles involves understanding how individuals interpret their approaches and actions in online discussions. The two case studies indicate that roles are based on individuals' choices when they join the online discussions. However, it is also important to highlight that the circumstances when they join the online discussions might also affect their adopted roles. For example, an individual who has fewer technology and computer skills may start with a more reserved role at the beginning and then move to a more

confident role when they are more comfortable and competent in using the technology. Salmon (2000) suggests, “At this stage, participants start to challenge the basis of the conference or the system” (p.35). Salmon further implies that in this stage, “experienced participants often become most helpful as guides to newcomers to the system” (p.35).

### *The Types of Online Interaction Model*

The *Types of Online Interaction Model* was developed to show the different roles that individuals may adopt in the online discussion environment. The model shows the distinctive approaches of individuals in online discussions, which can lead to individually adopted roles that can be seen as enabling personal learning. However, the roles are not necessarily fixed. Individuals are likely to move from one role to another when there are reasons to do so. Hot topics and being provoked by others are seen as two reasons for such a move.

Some individual approaches are disapproved of by others in online discussions.

Individuals who read other people’s posts without contributing, late contributors, and people who provoke others in the discussions are sometimes considered lurkers and bullies in online discussions. Contrary to the negative perception of bullies and lurkers portrayed in the literature, this study suggests that such approaches are perceived by individuals as contributing to their personal learning. The findings resulted in exploring the individual approach and the possibilities arise from the findings to discover how individuals engaged in the learning process to enable personal learning.

## Flexibility of the Roles

As I conclude the writing of this thesis I find that other researchers have followed a similar pattern of thought. Gasson and Waters' study (2005) found eight different roles that students adopt to promote and interact with the community of inquiry. They also found that, "each role represents a consistent pattern of behavior that appears to indicate an awareness of the student in relationship to a wider community of inquiry" (p.41). Their study concluded that, "individual students do not appear to conform to a single role, although the dominant role varies among students". Gasson and Water also found that students consciously or unconsciously choose a role when participating in an online community of learners such as in an online discussion. However, their study has not covered the effect of the roles students adopt with regard to their personal learning. This study has found that students appear to adopt different roles in accordance with their preferences for visibility or invisibility and levels of engagement during the learning process

## The Importance of Motivation and Strategies in Online Discussion

Although it is established in the literature that motivation and strategies are important in an online learning environment, it is unclear as to how strategies are used by an individual in the learning process. This study highlighted two different roles (eventual participation and provocation) used by individuals in online discussions which are seen as contributing to their learning. With motivation to participate and learn and a variety of strategies to enhance discussion on line, individual participants would have more power to control of their learning through effective participation. The rhythm in an individual's

learning process is influenced by motivation and affects the overall strategies used in online discussion. Whether students choose to participate or not depends on the contributing factors within the learning context, such as the need to participate actively to acquire more information. Similarly, the need to pause is largely a result of the decision to observe, analyse and evaluate others' contributions in online discussions in order for individual knowledge building to occur. As such, engagement in the learning process could be seen as equal to learning. With motivation and strategies, students are in control of their own learning in the online discussions and presumably are able to optimise online discussions as tools to acquire personal learning and individual goals.

### *The Strength of a Hermeneutic Perspective*

The concept of the hermeneutic circle has illuminated the relationship of whole and parts, which contributes to the individual learning process. When viewed through a hermeneutic lens, the iteration between individual and the context is seen to be an essential part in a learning process. The learning process in online discussions involves two-way interaction between an individual and his/her learning community; without those interactions, personal learning is unlikely to be enhanced through online discussion forums. By engaging in an iterative relationship, individuals interact within a community of learners and negotiate meaning through engaging with other individuals in that community.

### **Limitation of the Study**

The study has presented two types of interaction, which are considered as roles in online discussion. While the results of this study provide considerable support for the other two types of interaction (regular and non-engaged participants), the results are not derived from an in-depth student perspective, but rather from the researcher's observation, students' contributions and online discussion content for the course. If the *Types of Online Interaction Model* of the types of interaction could be seen as supporting evidence of engagement in personal learning, the acknowledgement of the perceived roles of individual should be viewed from a first person experiences. It is also likely that the roles presented here might not cover the whole spectrum of individual approaches and individual engagement in the learning process within an online learning environment.

### **Potential Value of These Findings**

The findings of this study point to ways in which the use of online discussion can be optimised as a teaching and learning method. Firstly, it is important for moderators to recognise individual roles and strategies that are adopted in the online discussion environment. By recognising the roles and strategies, teachers or tutors should be able to build up relationships with students and subsequently assist them to explore different roles that might contribute to their learning. For example, if a student adopts the role of provocateur, the tutor or moderator might encourage the student to pull back for a while and try another less visible role such as strategic facilitator or learner. For the student, having access to the model should open up the possibility of taking up a variety of roles in their online interaction.

Secondly, there is a need for a shift in perception as to how individuals participate in online discussions, especially for tutors or teachers. When a student adopts an approach that can be viewed as negative or inappropriate in the online discussion environment, it is not helpful to label the action as unconstructive or destructive to the individual and to the online community. Labelling such actions negatively might restrict the range of valid learning strategies that individuals can adopt in online discussion. For example, in this study, lurking is not an innate characteristic of the individual, rather delayed participation is a strategy used during the learning process. The shift is from labelling the individual to identifying the learning strategy.

Thirdly, students' satisfaction and level of comfort in using online discussion is critically important to enable learning. Students need ample time to adapt themselves to the online discussion environment before adopting roles to facilitate their own learning. The tutor's perception in my study was that students with non-English language background in the course benefited from the online discussions as they were not fast enough to catch up with the discussions in the face-to-face workshops. While the benefits of online discussion as a support to face-to-face interactions have already been established, more research on students' types of interaction in online discussions should be undertaken in order to explore further how different types of interactions lead to individual learning.



Finally, there is a need for tutors to understand the reasons for using online discussion as an instructional method in their classroom. Commonly, tutors adopt online discussion because it is there for them to use and explore. However, with the availability of the method, tutors should be able to utilise it in order to enhance individual student learning and their roles. This means that in a face-to-face environment, students might act differently towards their personal learning than in online discussions. Thus, tutors may be able to explore and encourage students to adopt different roles that can affect how they learn.

### **Contribution in Relation to the Learning Process within a Context**

My findings do not claim to be universal but present an interpretation of what happened in an online discussion environment within a particular course in a particular setting. Clearly, personal learning is affected by the environment and context. This study shows the importance of the interactions within the community, which enable learning. The fluidity of interactions and individual approaches within a context is important to facilitate personal learning. However, certain individual approaches, such as bullying and lurking, are somehow viewed in less positive ways and the learning side of these approaches is neglected. Labelling people runs the risk of overlooking the strategies that an individual uses for learning. The shift in perception from labelling people towards recognising individual approaches opens up possibilities for exploring other roles of individuals in online discussion. The literature on online discussion has limited coverage of the strategies employed by individuals who are perceived as bullies. Although the bully has always been labelled negatively in both the face-to-face and online

environments, this study acknowledges that provoking actions are a way to learn for an individual student. Conversely, the literature on online discussion has given greater coverage to lurking than to bullying. Although there is some literature that acknowledges that lurking is somehow related to learning, more research has considered lurking as a negative action in online discussion. Furthermore, tutors and moderators are often uncomfortable with the invisibility and participation level of lurkers during online discussion.

I argue that it is not appropriate to label an individual's approach to online discussion without recognising the learning intention behind that individual's actions. This study has found that personal learning is facilitated through individual approaches, which are roles that people adopt to online discussion. However, roles are not necessarily fixed; an individual might enter an online discussion environment with one role and end up with a different role. Different roles provide different types of engagement and visibility in online discussion, which suggests that different approaches and roles in online discussion might contribute to personal learning.

Unless the roles of students can take on are identified and explained, it is hard to encourage them participants move from one type of interaction to another. The second contribution of this study is to demonstrate the complex nature of individual learning and the way in people adopt their roles in online discussion, which reflects in students'

community behavior. Sometimes, action within an adopted role is viewed negatively by other learners, tutors or community members.

One of most important in the findings of this study is the emergence of *The Types of Interaction Model*, which indicates the roles individuals adopt in online discussions. The most significant point about this is the recognition that such roles can contribute to a simple model of individual learning strategies in an online learning environment. Future studies need to examine the different roles people adopt in online discussion and how they move from one role to another. Two areas of further study are recommended: roles of tutors and the roles of individuals in online discussion.

#### *Exploring Tutors' Roles*

Despite the focus on student interactions in this study, the role of tutors is crucial at different stages during online discussion sessions. In saying that, further research is needed in terms of how to build the relationships between tutors and students in order to recognize and enhance students' personal approaches in online discussions. As the role of strategic facilitator (in Chapter 5) suggests, there is a need to explore how tutors can recognize individual students' learning strategies during the learning process. While lurking and bullying are considered to be negative actions in online discussions, further studies are needed to unpack the tutors' strategies and approaches in encouraging more positive outcomes from the lurking and bullying actions. Further research on how to

differentiate of lurking and bullying in relation to using lurking and learning as individual learning strategies, would also be useful for enhancing tutors' roles in online discussion.

### *Exploring Individual Roles*

This study has also suggested other possible types of interaction in online discussions. Further analysis of other types of interaction, and the implications of these types for personal learning, is needed to expose individual preferences in participating in online discussions. Attempts could be made to explore how individuals perceive their roles and how the online discussions contributed to their personal and others' learning. In this study, no intervention was made during the online discussion sessions. Further study could possibly involve interventions during the online discussion sessions in order to explore the movement from one role to the other in optimizing learning. Getting to know more about different roles and dispositions would potentially benefit in distinguishing negative attitudes and learning approach.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I see this research is a beginning, not a conclusion. Overall, the results of this study suggest that individuals engaged in various ways during the learning process in online discussions. As students' strategies have been shown to affect student learning in this study, the use of online discussions may afford an increase in general student learning and understanding. Above all, the process of identifying how personal learning is facilitated in an online environment has shown that personal learning does not occur in

isolation, rather it occurs situated within a context of social learning. The most important role for tutors in online discussions is to recognize the learning that occurs as a result of students' individual approaches and to become more aware of how those approaches are related to student learning.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **A. ITEMS RELATED TO THE COURSE**

A-1 Course Information

### **B. ITEMS RELATED TO THE TWELVE PARTICIPANTS**

B-1 Human Ethics Approval

B-2 Invitation Letter

B-3 Consent Forms

### **C. ITEMS RELATED TO THE SIX PARTICIPANTS**

C-1 Interview Questions (1) – for six participants

C-2 Interview Questions (2) – for two participants

C-3 Interview Questions (3) – for tutor

*Appendix A-1*

**Course Information – Soci 112**



# Section One

## Course Overview

### 1.1 Welcome

Welcome to Soci 112: Global Society. We hope the time you spend in this course will be profitable and rewarding. Over the coming semester we look forward to sharing with you the excitement that comes from developing a sociological understanding of the global social world.

### 1.2 Course Coordinator

If you have any concerns or questions about any aspect of the course, you can contact the course coordinator, Brigid Thompson.

Office: Soci 207 (in the Soci Link Block)

Phone 3642987 extn 7185

Email: [brigid.thompson@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:brigid.thompson@canterbury.ac.nz)

### 1.3 Sociology and the Global Society

The concept of globalisation is a key theme of this course. It will inform the structure and content of many of the lectures and it will be talked about in workshops. You will be involved in analysing some of the major events and trends of our time and exploring the influence that they might have on a global society. Understanding the rapid pace of our complex, contemporary social world requires a consideration of social theory and global debates at a level beyond the national context explored in the introductory paper *Soci 111: Exploring Society*.

### 1.4 Course Content

Soci 112 is a six-point, semester course that will introduce student to contemporary social theory, the divisions and inequalities that have resulted from the globalising process, the social experiences of people in differing countries and contexts, and to the dynamics and challenges these processes pose for a global society.

### **1.5 Course Objectives**

As a result of doing this course we hope that you will gain a greater appreciation of sociology as a discipline; that you will develop a good understanding of the scope and potential of the sociological endeavour; and that you will begin to lay a foundation of study, reflection and writing skills that will stand you in good stead for involvement in further courses (whether within the School of Sociology and Anthropology or not).

### **1.6 Course Structure**

Teaching input in Soci 112 will be provided in two main contexts – lectures and workshops. In addition there will be opportunities for interaction and discussion with lecturers and tutors as required. Hopefully the benefit of all of this teaching input will be consolidated as you complete the assignments in the course. We wish you well in this.

### **1.7 Lecture programme**

Lectures will take place each Tuesday and Thursday during the semester (July 12 to October 15). Because of student numbers (more than any of our lecture theatres can accommodate), the same lecture will be given twice each day:

Stream A 11.00am to 11.50am Lecture room A1

Stream B 5.10pm to 6.00pm Lecture Room A4

You should initially attend the lecture stream (A or B) indicated on your enrolment form. Once course numbers settle down it should then be possible for you to attend whichever lecture stream better suits you. Details of the lecture programme are provided in Section Two of this course outline.

### **1.8 Workshop programme**

Weekly workshops will be held on Tuesdays and Thursdays in Room 252 in the Psychology/Sociology building. Details of the workshop programme are provided in Section Three of this course outline. You will be allocated to a workshop group during the first week of the course. Towards the end of that week you should consult the stage

one notice board outside the lifts on the second floor of the Psychology/Sociology building to confirm your workshop time. Some changing between groups will be possible but it would be appreciated if this could be kept to a minimum. Procedures for changing will be displayed on the course notice board. Please note that attendance at workshops is a required part of the course.

### **1.9 Teaching Assistants**

Workshops will be taken by three Teaching Assistants: Brigid Thompson, Jenny Cross and Jarrod Gilbert. Their office is Room 207 on the second floor of the Psychology/Sociology building. Teaching Assistants can be contacted by phone on 364-2987, extn 7185.

### **1.10 Assessment**

Assessment in the course will be as follows:

- a) Participation in WebCT discussions (5%)
- b) Essay One (20%) due Friday 13<sup>th</sup> August, 5pm
- c) Library exercise (5%) due Friday 13<sup>th</sup> August, 5pm
- d) Essay Two (30%) due 8<sup>th</sup> October, 5pm
- e) End-of course exam (40%) Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> October, 2:30-5:30

Further information on the assessment can be found in Section Four and Five of this course outline.

### **1.11 Textbooks and other reading**

There is no required textbook for this course. Instead, a course reader can be purchased from the Copy Centre in the Library at the beginning of the course.

A range of general Sociology text and study books are also available from the University Bookshop and on reserve in the library.

General sociology texts:

- Bilton, T., K. Bonnett, P. Jones, D. Skinner, M. Stanworth and A. Webster, 1996. *Introductory Sociology (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*, Houndmills, Macmillan.
- Germov, J., 1996. *Get Great Marks for Your Essays*, St. Leonards, Allen and Unwin.
- Giddens, A., 1997. *Sociology (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Mills, C. W., 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*, London, Oxford University Press.
- Spoonley, R., D. Pearson & I. Shirley, 1994. *New Zealand Society*, Palmerston North, Dunmore Press.
- Willis, E., 1999. *The Sociological Quest*, St. Leonards, Allens and Unwin.

Globalisation texts:

- Beynon, J. & D. Dunkerley, 2000. *Globalisation: the reader*, New York, Routledge.
- Cohen, R. & P. Kennedy, 2000. *Global sociology*, Houndmills, Palgrave.
- Held, D., 2001. *A Globalizing World? Culture, Economics, Politics*, London, Routledge.
- Scholte, J., 2000. *Globalization: a critical introduction*, New York, St. Martin's Press.
- Waters, M., 2001. *Globalization (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)*, London, Routledge.

### **1.12 Consultancy procedures**

A consultation meeting between student representatives and tutors will take place on Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> August in room 207 at 2.10pm. The purpose of this meeting will be to seek and obtain feedback on the course. The meeting will be attended by the course coordinator and the tutors, as well as a student representative from each of the workshop groups in the course. If you wish to discuss any aspect of the course outside this meeting, you should refer the matter to the course coordinator Brigid Thompson.

## **Section Two**

### **Lecture Programme**

#### **2.1 Lectures**

Soci 112 lectures will take place each Tuesday and Thursday during the semester (July 12 to October 15). An indication of lecture topics is provided overleaf. Because of student numbers in the course, the same lecture will be given twice on any given day: 11.00 to 11:50 in A1 and 5:10 to 6:00 in A4. You should initially attend the lecture stream (A or B) indicated in your enrolment form. Once numbers in the course settle down it should then be possible for you to attend whichever lecture stream better suits your timetable. You will find though that there is more room available at the evening lecture.

#### **2.2 Taping Lectures**

Each lecture will be video-taped and then be available to view in WebCT. The video can only be viewed on computers within the university campus. It should be emphasised that viewing the video cannot be considered to be a substitute for attending lectures. This taping is done for the benefit of students who, through peculiar or unforeseeable circumstances, are unable to attend a particular lecture. If you wish to make audio tape of lectures, you should obtain the permission of the lecturer concerned beforehand. This is a normal courtesy.

#### **2.3 Outline Notes for Lectures**

Outline notes will be provided for each of the lectures in Soci 112. These will be handed out at the start of the lecture session. Their purpose is to aid your note-taking during lectures. We hope you will find this to be the case. If for any reason you are unable to attend lecture you will be able to go to WebCT to access the lecture notes you missed. Please be aware that the notes handed out in any given lecture will closely approximate the number of students turning up to lectures. This means that there won't be a lot of spare copies. The rule is if you don't turn up to lectures then you are responsible for getting notes off the web yourself.

## 2.4 Course Schedule

### Part One: Introducing Globalisation

|            |                            |                 |
|------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. July 13 | Introduction to the Course | Brigid Thompson |
| 2. July 15 | Introducing Global Society | Brigid Thompson |
| 3. July 20 | History of Globalisation   | Brigid Thompson |
| 4. July 22 | Global Commodity Chains    | Elaine Hartwick |

### Part Two: Global Inequalities

|            |                                   |                  |
|------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| 5. July 27 | The New Rulers of the World       | Video Session    |
| 6. July 29 | Global Inequalities 1             | Jane Higgins     |
| 7. Aug 3   | Global Inequalities 2             | Jane Higgins     |
| 8. Aug 5   | McLibel                           | Video Session    |
| 9. Aug 10  | Transnational Corporations        | Alison Loveridge |
| 10. Aug 12 | Uneven Development                | Alison Loveridge |
| 11. Aug 17 | Globalisation and the Environment | Colin Goodrich   |
| 12. Aug 19 | Global Ecological issues          | Colin Goodrich   |

***Break for two weeks***

### Part Three: Globalisation and Culture

|             |                                |               |
|-------------|--------------------------------|---------------|
| 13. Sept 7  | Globalisation and Migration    | Lyndon Fraser |
| 14. Sept 9  | NZ and international Migration | Lyndon Fraser |
| 15. Sept 14 | Global Culture                 | Lyndon Fraser |
| 16. Sept 16 | Global Media                   | Lyndon Fraser |
| 17. Sept 21 | <i>Manufacturing Consent</i>   | Video Session |

### Part Four: Globalisation and Politics

|             |                                      |                 |
|-------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 18. Sept 23 | Global Social Movements              | Arnold Parr     |
| 19. Sept 28 | Explaining Social Movements          | Arnold Parr     |
| 20. Sept 30 | Global Crime                         | Jarrod Gilbert  |
| 21. Oct 5   | Globalisation and the Nation State 1 | Geoff Fougere   |
| 22. Oct 7   | Globalisation and the Nation State 2 | Geoff Fougere   |
| 23. Oct 12  | Assessing Globalisation              | Brigid Thompson |
| 24. Oct 14  | Review of the Course                 | Brigid Thompson |

## Section Three

### Workshop Programme

#### 3.1 When and Where

Workshops will be held on Tuesdays and Thursdays (July 20 to October 14) in room 252 in the Psychology/Sociology building. You will be allocated to a workshop group during the first week of the course. Towards the end of that week you should consult the notice board outside the lifts on the second floor of the Psychology/Sociology building to confirm your workshop time. Procedures for changing workshops will be displayed on the course notice board. Please note that attendance at workshops is a required part of the course.

#### 3.2 Format

Each workshop will comprise four segments: Administration, Study Skills, Lecture Review, and Substantive Topic. Extensive use will be made in workshops of multi-media presentation tools, especially Microsoft PowerPoint. Workshop material will be available on the course website (WebCT) before the event.

#### 3.3 Workshop Topics

- |               |                            |
|---------------|----------------------------|
| 1. July 20/22 | Introduction to the Course |
| 2. July 27/29 | Introducing Globalisation  |
| 3. Aug 3/5    | Global Inequalities        |
| 4. Aug 10/12  | Transnational Corporation  |
| 5. Aug 17/19  | Uneven Development         |

*Breaks for two weeks*

- |               |                                   |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|
| 6. Sept 7/9   | Globalisation and the Environment |
| 7. Sept 14/16 | Globalisation and Migration       |
| 8. Sept 21/23 | Global Culture/Global Media       |
| 9. Sept 28/30 | Global Social Movements           |
| 10. Oct 5/7   | Global Crime                      |
| 11. Oct 14/16 | Global Politics                   |

## Section Four

### Assessment Information

#### 4.1 Essays

The Purpose of the essay is to get you to think about an issue from a sosiological perspective and then write about this issue using formal academic conventions. Your essay should include an *introduction* (which contains an argument statement and a summary of your overall argument); a *main body* (which contains your argument and the supporting evidence for this); and a *conclusion* (which contains a summary of your argument and evidence). Your essay should also contain *references* throughout the text (using Harvard referencing Style) and it should include a *list of references* at the end. See Section Eight for the essay one question. Topics for essay two will be handed out during lectures in the last week of term one.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Essay One<br><i>Maximum of 1,200 words (20%)</i>               | due Friday 13 <sup>th</sup> August, 5pm |
| Library exercise<br><i>To be handed in with Essay One (5%)</i> | due Friday 13 <sup>th</sup> August, 5pm |
| Essay Two<br><i>Maximum of 2000 words (30%)</i>                | due Friday 8 <sup>th</sup> October, 5pm |

Completed essays should be deposited in the essay box located outside Room 207 in the Sociology and Anthropology Department, or in the appropriate essay box in the foyer level one.

#### 4.2 WebCT Discussions

WebCT discussions are designed to complement the learning you are doing in lectures and workshops. They are your space to work through ideas and concepts with your fellow students at your own pace and in your own time. Discussions will be assessed (in weeks 2-12) based on: the length of discussion postings (at least one paragraph per post); quality of post (o-topic) and relevant to the course material); and the number of posts (minimum



number 10). They make up 5% of your final assessment. See Section Seven for more information about WebCT.

### **4.3 Library Exercise**

The library exercise is worth 5% of your final grade. The purpose of this assignment is to help you find books and other materials you may need for essays. To help you complete this assignment, the Central Library will run Soci 112 Library Tutorials in the first and second weeks of the course. Booking sheets for these tutorials will be available at the library in week one and in workshops in week two.

### **4.4 Expectations**

Essays should be legible and with appropriate referencing. When your essay is returned you will find attached to it a completed evaluation sheet. A copy of this sheet can be found on the course website (WebCT). In preparing your essay, use this sheet as a reference document to sensitise you to expectations related to writing a sociological essay.

### **4.5 Due Dates and Extensions**

The School of Sociology and Anthropology has a firm policy both about due dates for stage one assignments and about penalties that result from submitting assignment late. Accordingly, you should plan your work in advance so that you can meet deadlines that have been set. You need to be aware of the fact that no assignment will be accepted without penalty after deadline unless evidence is provided in advance to substantiate a valid reason for extension.

Penalties for lateness are as follows (do not include weekends and holidays)

One day late: 10% penalty

Two days late: 15% penalty

Three days late: 20% penalty

Four days late: Work will not be marked

#### **4.6 Impaired Performance**

If you feel that your performance in completing in-term assessment has been impaired for whatever reason and you haven't already been granted an extension for the piece of work you can consider submitting an impaired performance application. This is done through the Examinations and Records section on level three of the Registry. This must be done within seven days of the submission date of the piece of assessment. If accepted by the department, your application will be taken into account during the end-of-course examiners' meeting and your final grade may be amended accordingly.

#### **4.7 Appealing Grades**

If you wish to appeal a grade given to a piece of your in-course assessment you are perfectly within your rights to do so. The matter should be referred to the person in charge of your workshop in the first instance. If the matter cannot be resolved at that level, your essay will be referred to the Course Coordinator, Brigid Thompson, for a reconsideration of the grade. If you wish to further appeal the reconsideration it will then be referred to the Head of School, Dr. Terry Austin. Hopefully satisfaction will be achieved by this stage. If not, the matter can be referred to the University's Academic Administration Committee.

#### **4.8 Plagiarism**

Plagiarism has been defined as using words or ideas of others and deliberately presenting them as your own. It is one of the most serious offences that can be committed in scholarly work. A book or essay is the intellectual property of its author, and if you use some part of the author's work, you must acknowledge this in an appropriate way. Very few students knowingly commit plagiarism, but sometimes, whether through carelessness or inadequate note-taking procedures, students end up presenting the words or ideas of others as their own. When you write your essays you must acknowledge every borrowing. It is not enough to include a list of sources that you may have consulted. By means of referencing comments in the text, e.g. (Giddens 1997), you must give published source and page numbers of your borrowings, whether these are the exact words of the source or you paraphrase. In this way you will show the marker exactly what you have taken from

each of the listed works and enable him or her to distinguish between these borrowings and your own ideas. If you are in doubt about what constitutes plagiarism consult the person in charge of your workshop. Be warned, though, that instances of plagiarism will be dealt with severely.

## **Section Five**

### **Exam Information**

#### **5.1. Date and Time**

The Soci 112 exam will be held on the afternoon of Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> October, 2004. It will last for 3 hours and will be worth 40% of your final grade.

#### **5.2. Format**

Questions will be in essay format and the questions will be of equal value. You can refer to exam papers from earlier years for an indication of likely format and style. These are available on the library homepage.

#### **5.3 Overview of Structure**

The exam paper will be in three sections. You will be required to answer three questions as follows:

One question from Section A

One question from Section B

One question from Section C

#### **5.4 Section A**

Section A will contain four essay questions in total. These questions will be related topics covered in part two of the course (Global Inequalities): Global Inequalities; Transnational Corporations; Uneven Development; Globalisation and the Environment. You will be asked to answer ONE question in this section.

#### **5.5 Section B**

Section B will contain four essay questions in total. These questions will be related to the topics covered in part three of the course (globalisation and Culture); Global Culture; Global Media; Globalisation and Migration; NZ and International Migration. You will be asked to answer ONE question in this section.

### **5.6 Section C**

Section C will contain four essay questions in total. These questions will be related to the topics covered in part four of the course (Globalisation and politics): Global Social Movements; Global crime; Global Politics; Assessing Globalisation. You will be asked to answer ONE question in this section.

### **5.7 Where to Go**

This is an official University exam and so details of your room allocation for the exam will be available from the registry concourse a week before the exam.

### **5.8 Exam Clashes**

If you have an exam clash or require special arrangements for sitting the examination you should contact the course coordinator Brigid Thompson as soon as possible.

## **Section Six**

### **Guide to WebCT**

#### **What is WebCT?**

WebCT is website that contains a variety of course material that you will need during the semester. It contains information like your course outline; lecture, tutorial and assessment material; as well as a space for you to communicate with your tutors and fellow students.

#### **Why do I need to know about it?**

Most of the course materials that you will need are found in WebCT. More importantly, part of your assessment involves the use of discussion tool in WebCT – more about this later.

#### **How do I access WebCT?**

WebCT can be accessed from anywhere that has the internet – for example from the university computer workrooms, or your home. You will find the main WebCT webpage at: <http://webct.canterbury.ac.nz>

In order to logon to WebCT, you need your university code and password. Your usercode will be something like *abc123*, and your password something like *water111*. Remember not to use uppercase letters or spaces when typing in your usercode and password.

#### **I'm logged in, what next?**

You will see a list of the courses you are enrolled in that are using WebCT. Click on the title of the course to view the content of that course. Once you do this, you will find yourself in the homepage of your course. From here you can access the various materials you need.

#### **What is the 'Discussions' link for?**

If you click on the 'Discussions' icon, you will find yourself in a page with a table and lots of 'topics'. This is where your online discussions will take place. In order to begin a

discussion, click on a topic, for example 'Lounge'. Doing this takes you into a discussion room. If you want to compose a message for others to see, click on the 'compose message' button at the top of the page.

Usually thought, it is expected that you will reply to the message that your tutor has composed. You can do this by clicking on the message that you want to reply to and then clicking on the 'reply' button in this message.

When you do this, a box will appear. This is where you can type your message. It has a space for your subject heading and space for your message. Once you have finished typing your message, click on the 'post' button at the bottom of the page so that other people can read what you have written. You will not be able to see your own message immediately –you need to refresh the page first. You can do this by clicking on the 'update listing' button at the top of the page (it's right beside the 'compose message' button).

### **Tips for engaging in online discussions**

For those of you who are new to online discussions, here are a number of things you may like to consider:

- The same rules of polite behaviour apply in online discussions as in 'real life'. It is important to listen to other people's point of view politely, and respond appropriately.
- People cannot read your body language when you are online – they may not interpret your comment as humour as readily as they might in a face-to-face discussion. It is a good idea to let people know when you are joking about something.
- Online discussions are open to all your classmates to read – think carefully about your message before you post it.
- Keep your posts fairly short – one small paragraph at once is enough. If you have lots to say, break your ideas up and write several messages. This allows people to respond more easily to what you are saying.
- Occasionally, for reasons unknown, your post may disappear while you are writing it. To solve this problem, it is a good idea to write down, or type your

ideas elsewhere, and then type them into your message. I always type my message into Microsoft Word first and then ‘copy and paste’ the message into my discussion page.

### **What else can I do in WebCT**

As mentioned earlier, WebCT contains various course material that you may find useful. To access these, click on the icons on the course homepage – for example ‘Lecture Material’ or ‘Assessment Material’. Once you are in any of these pages, you find that some titles have blue text – this indicates that they are hyperlinks (you can click on them to reveal another page). Feel free to explore these pages.

Some materials appear as Portable Document Format (PDF) files. PDF files need a programme to be able to read them – called Adobe Acrobat Reader. All the university computers have this programme, but if you are accessing material from home, you may need to install Adobe Acrobat Reader yourself. It is a free programme. For more information about Adobe Acrobat Reader, check out the School help file at:

<http://www.soci.canterbury.ac.nz/help/jelp.shtml#Acrobat>.

### **I’m still confused, what should I do?**

Your tutor should be able to give you some one-on-one help during their office hours.

Make a time to see them and explain that you need some help with WebCT. We understand that using WebCT is a steep learning curve for some people, and are happy to help you in any way we can.



## Appendix B-1

### Human Ethics Approval

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University of Canterbury

Private Bag 4800  
Christchurch  
New Zealand

Telephone: +64-3-366 7001  
Facsimile: +64-3-364 2999



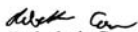
15 March 2004

Azidah Abu Ziden  
Department of Education  
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Azidah

The Human Ethics Committee advises that your research proposal "**The Place of Personal Learning in Online Discussion**" has been considered and approved.

Yours sincerely

  
Rebekah Carson  
Secretary

## *Appendix B-2*

University of Canterbury  
School of Education

### **INFORMATION**

You are invited to participate as a subject in the research project: The Place of Personal Learning in Online Discussion.

The aim of this project is to explore how individuals create knowledge through online discussion activities. This project will also explore what qualities are required in an activity design to facilitate students' personal construction of knowledge through the interaction and engagement in the online discussion community.

Your involvement in this project will involve

- i. participating in an online discussion activity in a course of your study
- ii. participating in interviews conducted by the researcher
- iii. writing a diary/personal log of your experience participating in the online discussion

You have the right to withdraw from the project at any time, including withdrawal of any information provided.

There will be no risks foreseen in the performance of the tasks and application of the procedures in the research.

The result of the project may be published, but you may be assured of the complete confidentiality of the data gathered in this investigation; the identity of participants will not be made public without their consent. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, no

name or personal identification will be highlighted in the project. All names and identification will be replaced using appropriate identifications.

This project is being carried out as a requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Azidah Abu Ziden under the supervision of Dr. Victor Chen and Dr. Jane Robertson, who can be contacted at the university:

- i. Dr. Victor Chen (UCTL) – 3642987 ext.7435
- ii. Dr. Jane Robertson (UCTL) – 3642851

He/she/they will be pleased to discuss any concerns you may have about participation in the project.

The project has been reviewed ***and approved*** by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee.

*Appendix B-3*

*Azidah Abu Ziden  
University Centre for Teaching and Learning (UCTL)  
Room 423, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor, Law Building,  
University of Canterbury,  
Christchurch.*

*Ph. No: 3642987 ext. 7701  
Email: [azi12@student.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:azi12@student.canterbury.ac.nz)*

*8<sup>th</sup> March 2004*

**CONSENT FORM**

**The Place of Personal Learning in Online Discussion**

I have read and understood the description of the above-named project. On this basis I agree to participate as a subject in the project, and I consent to publication of the results of the project with the understanding that anonymity will be preserved.

I understand also that I may at any time withdraw from the project, including withdrawal of any information I have provided.

NAME (please print) : .....

Email address: .....

Signature : .....

Date: .....

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS 1<sup>st</sup> phase (STUDENT)

### Part A (Personal – general questions)

1. Can you please tell me briefly about your self? (general questions on age, what course is she/he taking, personal interest)

*e.g. Where do you come from? or Are you an international student? How long have been in university? or Is this your first year in university? Have you use WebCT before?*

### Part B (General understanding about learning)

1. What is learning for you? How do you go about learning? Can you give me an example on how you go about learning?

### Part C (Online discussion in this course)

1. Do you feel that online discussions have made a difference to your learning? Can you tell me about the differences (if any)?
2. How do you think the lectures and/or workshops in this course were supported by the online discussion? Or did the online discussions support the lectures or workshops at all?
3. What else would you like to tell me about your learning from the online discussion?

### Part 4 (Personal Learning – refer to contributions)

*(this is an overall questions to be selected when interviewing individually)*

1. Can you explain why in certain weeks you contribute more to the discussions and the other weeks you just response once? (3 students)
2. How do you feel at that point when someone disagree with your ideas? (2 students)
3. A couple of times the moderator (Brigid) encourage students to response to each other rather than strictly answering her questions, but it seems that most of the

students did not encourage to contribute more than the required post. What do you think makes you contribute only once a week? *(3 students)*

4. In what ways that you think you ideas shift during the discussion in week 8/ or other weeks and why? Or was there any shifting of ideas at all? *(let the students read her/his post before answering the question)*

### **Part 5 (Online learning)**

1. Do you think your experience using WebCT discussion tool changed the way you learn in anyway or not? If your answer is “yes”, in what ways the way you learn changed and why? If your answer is “no”, in what way the activities can be changed and why?
2. What else would you like to tell me about your learning from the online discussion

*\*part c, d & e are reversible*

### **Interview Questions 2<sup>nd</sup> phase (STUDENT)**

What I would like to gain/know in the 2<sup>nd</sup> interview?

- a. Students' experience of learning – whether there is any changes on their conceptions over the two interviews
- b. Students' experience of knowledge – see how they respond to the conceptions of learning & try to link the two together
- c. The connection between social interaction and personal construction of knowledge in the online discussions

#### **Part 1 (Students' conceptions of learning)**

1. What is learning for you? How do you go about learning in this course?  
(the same question that I have asked in the 1<sup>st</sup> interview)

*Notes:*

*Further questions might be developed accordingly during the interviews – such as why their conceptions have changed overtime from the first and the second interview, etc.*

2. Show them some of their 1<sup>st</sup> interview quotation in order for them to recall what they have said in the 1<sup>st</sup> interview.

#### **Part 2 (Students' conceptions of knowledge)**

1. What do you think knowledge is?
2. Do you think there is any connection between knowledge and online discussion?
3. How do you decide what is important to focus in this course?

#### **Part 3 (Social Interaction & Personal construction of knowledge)**

1. Find a concrete example from the interview or transcript to develop questions in here (refer to individual)
2. Refer to the diagram:

How do the interactions in here, help you to develop your own ideas?

How do the interactions here inform your learning?



## **TUTOR INTERVIEW**

### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Can you please tell me about your background such as your teaching experience and how long have you been as a WebCT moderator?
2. What is teaching for you? What do you think teaching is?
3. What is learning for you?
4. 4. What do you expect your students to learn in this course (from the online discussions specifically)?
5. How do you know when your students have learned?
6. Do you think the lectures and/or workshops in this course have been enhanced by the online discussion? And if so, how?
7. Do you think there are any differences between teaching online from teaching in the lectures and workshops? Can you tell me about the differences?
8. What have you learn from teaching online?
9. What would you do differently next year and why?
10. How do you think the students learn from the online discussions... as you see the interaction that happens in the WebCT?
11. Do you think there are any differences between learning online from learning in lectures and workshops for the student?
12. As you follow the online discussion, are you aware of moments when learning has occurred for a student as a result of their online participation?
13. What have you learn about your students' learning online?
14. What else would you like to tell me about your students' learning from the online discussions?